

# A BID FOR LOYALTY

BY

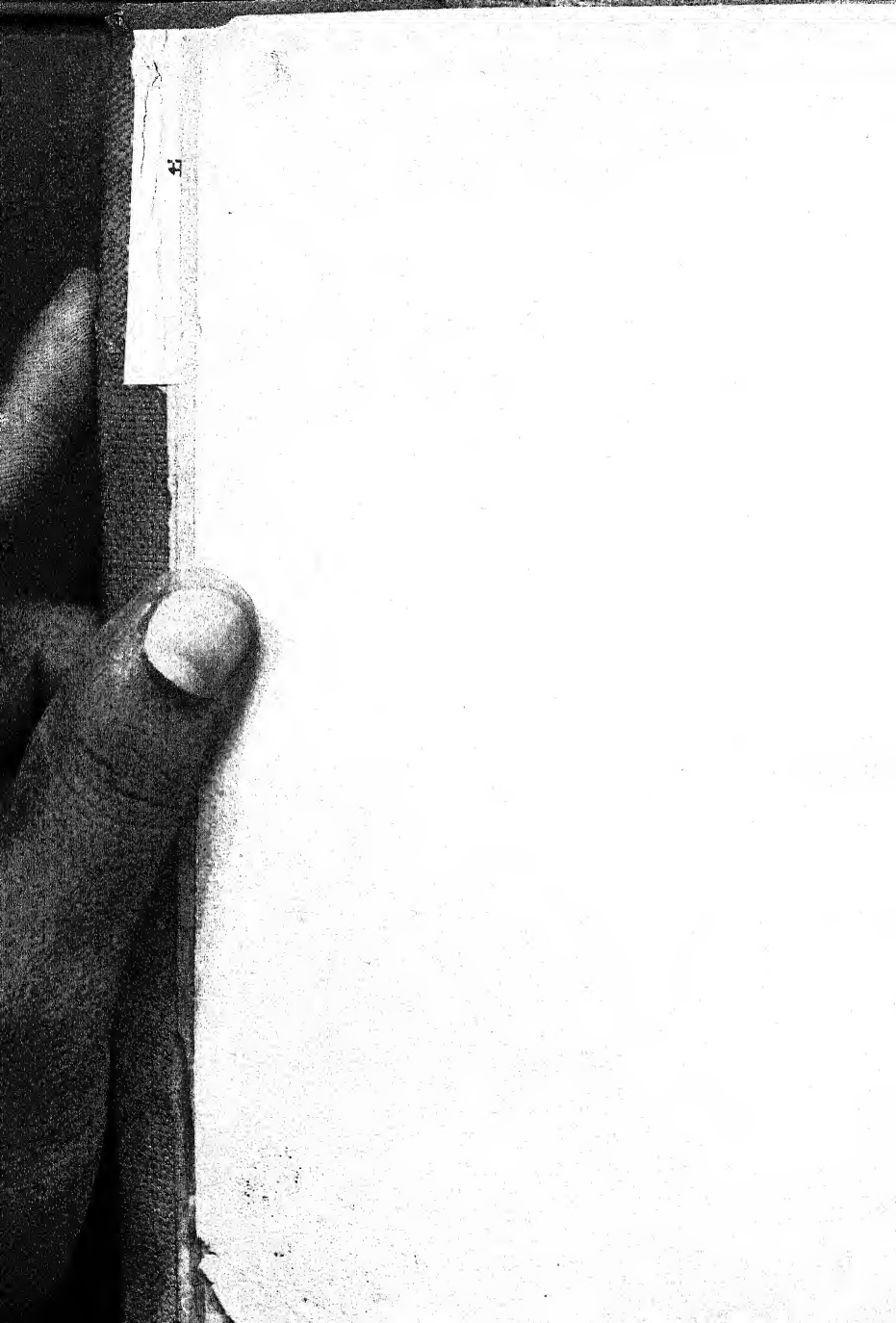
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## CHAPTER I

### CAUGHT IN THE ACT

WHEN I pressed the spring and felt the panel slide down my first sensation was one of humorous indignation that I had never discovered the hiding place before—in the days when I had not only the cosy library (into which I had just forced my way at dead of night for the purpose of finding the recess now open before me), but the entirety of the old manor house to ramble over at will and to ransack with discretion and a cautious alertness.

It made me smile to think that never, on any previous occasion of my frequent boyish piracies, had there been so much need of that cautious alertness as then. For there I was, for the first time, with no shadow of right—there I was, on premises which I had but recently sold for a valuable consideration which had been fully and duly paid—there I was, in fact, a midnight burglar, in search of valuables hidden in the house of my forefathers which I had sold away from me.

The room was so familiar that I could not work up a sense of guilt. It needed more concentration of mind than I was, at the moment, capable of giving, to realize that I

had no more justification for my presence at that particular spot at that particular time, and, especially, for that particular purpose which had brought me there, than any chance night thief would have had. I was blandly confident, easy in my conscience, and, at this supreme instant of discovery, intoxicated with triumph. For the darting glow of the dark lantern which I directed into the cavity, laid open by the sliding panel, afforded me ample light to see a double row of round, comfortable-looking canvas bags standing portentously within the secret recess. I hardly needed to open one of these to assure myself that they were filled with gold coin or bullion. I knew my grandfather's queer ways, and as soon as I saw the bags I guessed that the fortune which I had previously sought in vain at last lay before me.

In front of the large bulging bags stood another, smaller, more delicate in shape and appearance, in fact, more like a rounded purse of chamois leather. I took it up, and the rough unevennesses which I felt within betrayed their secret. The bag was full of precious stones. I undid the knot which tied its mouth and felt within the belly of the purse. Then I peeped. There were the soft, soapy feeling diamonds, cut and uncut—I could see the ruddy glow of rubies and the green shimmer of the lovely emerald. The sheen of the lantern rays glowed within the bag like any Auroral kaleidoscope. The facets of the cut stones laughed and winked

*Revised*

## CAUGHT IN THE ACT

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at me joyously, as though they were glad to be "in the family" again.

"Good God!" I cried to myself (silently enough to be sure, for how was I to know who slept in the house and where?) "The old chap was worth more than I thought!"

As I thought rather than spoke the words, I reached out my hand to the bags of gold, a little puzzled to know how I could best carry away so great a weight. Even as my hand was in the recess, drawing one of the bags to me, while I guessed at the value of the contents, I heard a chuckle from behind.

I turned round with a start, and as I did so two or three of the candles in the great chandelier that hung from the centre of the ceiling flamed up as a match passed from one to the other, and the room glowed with the subdued light which the candles vouchsafed.

Two men were in the room, one by the door, the other beneath the chandelier which he had just lighted. Both carried pistols. Both were foreign in appearance. Both smiled sardonically, with the smile of a sardonic Latin, the subtle irony of a Frenchman. The window through which I had made my way was still open. In my first shock of alarm I thought to fly by it. I snatched up the little bag of jewels, and turned to make my escape. As I did so a woman's voice cried out, "Oh don't. Don't shoot. *Né tirez pas.*"

At the same moment, with a swift rustling

movement, a girl passed between me and the pistols which were pointed at me. I looked and saw her, and all thought of flight left me.

Sylvia Dumergue (I learnt the name of the lady later on in the night) was a girl whom few men could look at once and be satisfied. She was tall for her sex, quite five feet eight in height, but her well developed torso and rounded hips saved her from any suspicion of gawkiness. Her waist curved in to a wholesome girdle, and, though it was the waist of a strong woman, a woman fit for the duties of maternity, the swell of her shoulders and bosom gave it a tapering appearance which had an effect of lightness and grace, the effect which Horace called "*gracilis*." The rich crimson tea gown which she wore permitted her arms to be seen above the elbow. These were round, smooth and dimpled, well clothed with soft fair-skinned flesh, but not bulging coarsely, as though over-stuffed—like the arms of some women who boast of being "plump." Her limbs were lithe and supple, her every movement lissome as the pacing of an antelope. And her face—ah! Her face! That oval glory of Southern splendour, poised on that stately neck with buoyant firmness. Though different beauties appeal to different tastes, it is always difficult for me to understand that any one could deny that Sylvia was the most beautiful woman in the world. I know I am wrong in this, and that there are many who would prefer the dollish dainti-

ness of tiny figures, golden hair, blue eyes, and kittenish manner to the overwhelming stateliness of those great eyes, sometimes black, sometimes a noble violet, of that classic sweep of cheek, that firm rounded chin, that mighty breadth of brow, those sweeping ebon lashes and eyebrows, that short upper lip (of which the pouting angle whispered love in defiance of the majesty of her bearing), those fragile porcelain ears—but to take feature by feature is to try to build a palace out of a box of toy bricks. No one could give the least idea of the glow of feminine charm, of sexual fascination, which radiated from that gracious lady. Despite the Southern style of her face and eyes, and the rich abundance of her sombre cloud of silken hair, her skin was fair and delicate, and if its hue was rather that of an apricot than of a peach, it but accorded the better with her loveliness. Her voice was rich and vibrant, her gestures dignified and fervid.

I knew enough French to follow the words which passed rapidly between the woman and the men, but (a course I propose to follow throughout this book) I see no object in telling my story in a hybrid language, half French and half English. It may be a sign of knowledge to adorn the page with other languages than one's own. But mother English is good enough for me, and except where broken English is necessary for the understanding of any particular scene, I see no advantage in making such Frenchmen as may appear in

the course of this story speak in any other tongue than English.

"I believe he may be the very man," said Sylvia, in a low voice, to the two men who had first interrupted my enterprise.

"Leave us to deal with him," said the elder of the two men.

"You won't harm him," persisted the girl.

"Not unless it's necessary," answered the man.

She hesitated, and then turned to me, who all this time had been standing stock still staring at the girl in a way at once foolish and rude. But she seemed to understand that there was no room for insult in my gaze. She flushed a little as she spoke to me, and her tongue was that of a well-bred and well-educated Englishwoman.

"Will you promise not to try to escape till——"

"There must be no 'till,'" snarled the elder of the two men, who seemed to take the lead. "He must promise to place himself in our hands."

The girl began to repeat his words to me in English, but I stopped her. "I understood," said I. "Yes, I promise. I *am* in your hands."

The elder man seemed relieved, almost pleased. He nodded briskly. "You'd better leave us with him," he said.

She gave me one glance, and I read encouragement in it, whatever she may have meant



and his mouth curled in a smile that seemed more ironical than inimical.

"Have you any last wish?" he asked courteously.

Well, I knew that my time was come. What a fool I had been! I should have done better to make a dash for it. I should at any rate have had a better run for my life than I had now. And yet, even at that vital moment, when I was justified in thinking that I saw my death in the round barrel mouth which was now raised to cover me, I felt that if this were to be the end Sylvia would never have looked at me, have spoken to me, as she had. At any rate I would not show the white feather. Even if, as I now began to suspect, the pistols had been an arranged affair, and it had been a matter of management that I drew the unloaded weapon, I did not charge these two with such cowardly fraud as they would have been guilty of had they compassed my death by such trickery. I stood up to the limit of my height, and faced the Count unflinchingly.

"Are you ready?" asked he nonchalantly. "You see, there's no doubt about it now."

"Yes," said I. "I'll give the word. Now. One. Two. Three. Fire."

It was not altogether bravado that upheld me. I think there was an undercurrent of disbelief that I could die there and then and under such circumstances. At all events I felt as cool before the threat of the pistol as at the wicket before a round-arm bowler.

The Count aimed full at me, and stood,

motionless, for four or five seconds which seemed an age to me. Then he threw down his pistol as the Duke threw away his cigarette, with a laugh.

"I think he'll do, Jean," said the Duke.

"I think he will," said the Count.

I breathed more easily. My life, then, was for the moment safe. They had merely played this drama to test my courage. What would come next ?

"Get the rapiers down," said the Duke. "It's my turn now."

"You can stand fire," said the Count. "But now we must see if you can bear the dance and play of light on steel. Are you a fencer ?"

"I am no professor," said I. "But, for an Englishman, I can hold my own."

And indeed I spoke with some modesty, for I was the best foil in the fencing club where I had learnt the art.

"Choose," said the Count, producing five or six rapiers from a stand of arms which was new to the library since the time of my possession of the manor-house.

I took a sword and tested it. To me it seemed faultless. I desired no better wherewith to defend my life and such honour as the fall of circumstance had left me. I made a brief salute, and bent my knees in position.

"At your service, sir," said I.

But though I doubtless seemed sufficiently debonair I thought to myself that there could be no unloaded swords ! If the steel slipped

between my ribs, I was done for in spite of all that had gone before. And why had the lady disappeared so completely? I wished that these men would give me the chance to explain how I came to be where they had found me before I was put to the sword's point. I had an excuse. Yes! I had! Surely I should not die with the brand of a skulking crime such as burglary upon me!

"At your service, sir," I said.

"No hurry, my friend," replied the Duke. "Jean, I think a little more light is desirable. These dainty toys are not for haphazard thrusting in a half darkness."

I could see the familiar fondness with which the man held and toyed with his rapier. It needed no wizardry to guess that he loved the art of fence and was a master of it.

The younger Frenchman deftly lit the rest of the candles in the chandelier, and, in addition, went here and there about the room where old-fashioned sconces were installed, and lit light after light till the room was almost shadowless, so freely did the candle rays flow from every quarter.

"Good," said the Duke briskly. He removed his coat and waistcoat, and turned the cuff of his right shirt sleeve so that he could roll the linen up above his elbow, leaving the forearm bare. In this I speedily imitated him.

Suddenly his indifferent and somewhat *dégagé* bearing changed. His nerves and muscles seemed to spring to high tension. He

turned to face me, and his eyes were steely and severe. Then he made the grand salute as I had never seen it done before.

He came to the engagement. "On guard, sir," said he.

I brought my point in position and felt his steel. His wrist was stronger, more supple than mine. I knew it in a moment.

## CHAPTER II

### EXPLANATIONS BEGIN

AS my steel touched the Duke's, the nervous strength of the Frenchman's wrist seemed to tingle from blade to blade. Had I not instinctively felt that it was not the intention of these men to kill me I should have given myself up for lost. But if they had meant to take my life, why should they in the first place have taken the trouble to arrange the pistol duel, when they might have shot me without danger to themselves? And why should they again have put arms into my hands, and placed me on an equality in all but skill with the elder and more prominent of the two? It is a truism that the most practised swordsman may fall a victim to one utterly ignorant of the art of fence. Had I been entirely a novice with the rapier perhaps the affair might have ended differently, for who can tell what may happen when a tyro sees the blink of steel passing in darting flashes within a hair's breadth of his body. Even I, with a head which I do not boast in calling exceptionally cool, and with some experience of both foils and the more deadly buttonless blades, buoyed up moreover with the sense that it was good and not ill fortune which was coming to me—even I,

I say, with all these fortifying elements, felt a sinking at the heart when the tense sinews of my forearm recognized the touch of a master on the hilt of the sword whose shrill voice was raised in duet with the song of my own. I felt resourceless, as though my only chance was to keep the steel fretting against steel, to try with all my ability to prevent the Duke from disengaging. But what chance had I to do this against a man who was a supreme master of the sword? With the chuckling menace of a scream of steel the Duke disengaged, and while I thought how best to parry his point came darting past so close to my left side that it touched my shirt. I sprang back. I could not help it, though I would have given worlds had I not given way even once during the encounter. And before I could attempt a riposte the Duke's steel was again singing its low song as it passed backwards and forwards, up and down, the rapier which was of so little use to me. I had been called alert and swift at the school of arms. But I could scarce see the way the Duke's point went. However well I might have stood up to an average fencer, the little I knew rather put me at a disadvantage now, for it enabled me to appreciate how matchless was the skill to which I was opposed.

Again the Duke disengaged and lunged, this time playing high and flashing his point so close past my throat that I almost felt the steel enter. Again he held me, and again

threatened me with so near a death that, for all my cool head and reasons for hope, I felt my throat growing parched and my eyes hot and burning.

But I did not again give way. He pressed me, played wonderful tricks with his steel, enlarged the menace of his lunges so that my eyes were dazzled with the repeated flickerings of the darting point. But still he did not inflict one single scratch, did not draw one drop of blood. If he meant to kill me, surely this was the refinement of wanton cruelty, for no cat ever played with its victim so easily as the Duke with me. I think I kept my courage sufficiently for honour and the repute of a brave man. But I cannot deny that I was glad when the Duke lowered his point, and then made a salute, in which he exhibited an originality, a finesse, a nicety of swordsmanship which kept me agape, my sword held foolishly before me instead of drooping in answer to the Duke's courtesy.

"Jean," cried the Duke to his younger comrade (and even as he spoke he showed a play of wrist which was delightful to witness now that his point no longer threatened me), "he'll do. He can face lead and steel as well as any man need, and though he is no great swordsman, yet he has sufficient skill for all the encounters which he is likely to undergo. Sir," he said to me, "I beg you to be seated. I have well breathed you. No. Be in no hurry. You shall have a full explanation and, doubtless, give one of your

presence here. But in the meantime I have thirst, and you should have, and we have another to consult."

He resumed his coat and waistcoat, and I followed his example with an easy heart.

He took my sword from me and saw me seated in one of my grandfather's armchairs (for I had sold much of the old-fashioned furniture with the house). Then the Count raised a small golden or gilt handbell which stood on the magnificent carved marble mantelpiece, the pride of the Fishers for generations, now, alas! their pride no more.

I heard a rustle which made me turn quickly to the doorway, and the girl who had stayed my flight re-entered. She came in smiling, her face full of kindness and *bonhomie*. There was even a look of *camaraderie* in her glance in my direction, which at first I could not understand.

"He'll do, m'mselle," cried the Duke. "Jean, I think a magnum of the Château Palmer. We won't wake the servants. Egad, the fencing bout has breathed even me."

Sylvia had come forward to the fireplace, in which there were still a few embers on the dogs which glowed ruby, pink and gold through the grey covering of ash, for it was the early morning of October 6, 1870, and the nights were chilly in the Blyth valley. She rested one little foot on the great fender and leaned her elbow on the marble mantel.

She half turned her head to look at me where I sat in the armchair, opposite the Duke, who had by this time also seated him-



self on the other side of the fireplace, and was puffing out the first rings of a freshly lit cigarette. She smiled as she saw him offer his case to me.

"I knew he would stand the tests," said she. "Shall I wake my father or not?"

"The less your father knows of the business the better," said the Duke. "He'll never consent to your taking the part in it which it is absolutely essential that you should take if he is forewarned of your intention, and he might seriously imperil the venture."

"Then shall I tell this gentleman all now, at once," said Sylvia, "and ask him if he will help me."

"Gad!" cried the Duke. "He's got no choice. It's either the police or his fealty and true service in the venture. And he has shown himself a man of spirit. I have no doubt as to his choice—indeed, such a man has no choice in the matter when circumstances fall in so strange a manner. But it is not for you, m'mselle, to be the first to volunteer an explanation. Ah! Here comes the Count with the Bordeaux and glasses. Good Jean. What a *sommelier* you'd make with practice!"

The wine was open, and the exquisite aroma, softer and yet more pungent than that of violets, filled the room.

The Count filled four glasses, handed one to each of us three, and took one in his own hand.

"Thief or no thief," he cried, "I drink to a brave man."

I leapt to my feet, and was about to throw

the wine in his face—a shocking waste of divine Bordeaux which I have always been grateful was prevented. Before I could cry out in indignation the girl's voice sounded in my ears, and, ah! how sweet were its notes, how comforting its words!

"For shame, Count," said she. "'Tis not like you wantonly to insult a man who has proved his courage."

"Nay, friend," said the Count, holding his hand up and wagging his head in ironic negative as he saw my glass raised. "I did it but to try you. You must admit that the circumstances under which we had the honour of making your acquaintance were peculiar, suspicious in fact. But it was enough to see your look of indignant surprise at the mere idea of being taken for a thief to disabuse the mind of the observant for ever."

"Yes," said the Duke. "So, to use the opening words of 'Richelieu,' and fervently hoping that we may have better fortune than those conspirators, I give you the toast, 'Here's to our enterprise.'"

"Amen! Amen!" cried Sylvia, in English, and with a glance at me that set my blood aflame, and drove poor Maggie Ramsbotham, the parson's daughter, clean from my mind. "Here's to our enterprise!"

With that light in Sylvia's eyes upon me I'd have drunk success to any venture proposed to me. The glasses, even that of the lady, were religiously emptied, and the toast drunk solemnly, with earnest meaning, and with resolution.

"And now, my friend," said the Duke, crossing his legs, motioning to the Count to refill the three glasses from which we men had drunk (for the lady had smilingly declined more wine), and lighting another cigarette, "suppose you favour us with an account of the circumstances leading up to the discovery of an honourable gentleman in what looked very like the act of burglary. Tell us how you came to enter like a thief in the night where you would have been welcomed by day. That open panel tells a tale, and partly explains you. But you must be frank with us, for should your explanation satisfy us, we shall have a great offer to make you."

My tale was simple enough. And yet, when I thought that I should have to tell of Maggie Ramsbotham, to explain my reckless attempt to get my own, I felt discouraged. How would this splendid girl, here, in the room with me, how would she regard a man who had been foolish to fall in love, or to fancy himself in love, with any woman other than herself? Surely she must have a knowledge of her own transcendent qualities sufficient to make her inclined to despise any man who could love, or think that he loved, any less perfect creature. But though, with some of us, it is true to say that "we needs must love the highest when we see it," surely she would accept the excuse that I had never seen her, had never had any idea that so lovely, so gracious a lady could exist. However it might end, I must tell my tale straight-

forwardly. I knew that not one of the three would, for an instant, be deceived by anything in the nature of a lie.

"As you know," said I, "I am Harry Fisher, the grandson and heir of old Tom Fisher, the owner in fee of Soleby manor. My grandfather died last March, leaving me all he possessed, which was considered to be a great estate, apart from the value of this manor-house and lands. But he was a man famed for his eccentricity, and no one had any certain knowledge of what his fortune consisted. He distrusted lawyers and bankers alike, and kept his securities, whatever they might be, in his own hands. It was evident that he must have had considerable wealth, for though the manor-house lands had been so shrunken within the last hundred years that their rentals were quite trifling, he spared no money on my education, sent me up to Cambridge with a good allowance, insisted that I should improve my knowledge of French and German by passing six months in the Quartier for the one and six months at Hanover for the other, and, though he only maintained a modest establishment, spared himself nothing for which he had any desire. With his consent I had become—become — en — en ——" I looked apologetically at the girl standing by the fireplace. I knew it was an impertinence even to think that it could concern her in any way whether I were engaged or married, or single and free. But I could not help that apologetic glance.

I watched her, as I continued. I had not offended her with the glance, but she did not look overjoyed with the news of my entanglement. "Engaged" (I brought it out at last) "to Maggie Ramsbotham, the daughter of the vicar of Soleby, and indeed the old man often expressed himself eager to see a great-grandchild, so that it had been arranged that we should be married this last summer had not the old man died.

"But his death put an end to that. Not only for reasons of the decency of mourning, but because it appeared that not only were the supposed riches of the old man invisible, but the manor-house and lands had been recently mortgaged to quite half their value. Search as we might, we could find no valuables or securities other than the plate and antique furniture in the house—and grandfather's income could not have arisen from those. At last we were brought to the dreadful conclusion that he had been spending his capital all his life, and had raised money on his estate to keep things going for the last years of his existence. Apart from a few hundred pounds in the bank, not much more than enough to pay the succession and probate duties, I found myself heir to nothing but the incumbered manor-house and estate.

"And I was engaged to Maggie, the daughter of a poor country parson, who looked forward to a speedy marriage which should remove her from the hardships of her home. Her father, old Perc. Ramsbotham (a greedy old

rascal like many others of his cloth), urged on the marriage, and proved to me over and over again that it was my duty to sell the manor-house and estate as quickly as possible, and so realize sufficient cash wherewith to make a start in life. So, as you know, I sold the hall and estate which had been in my family for many centuries, and with the house and lands I sold most of the furniture and household goods about the place. The mortgage was paid off, and what with lawyers' costs, interest, and a supplemental charge of which at first we knew nothing, there were but two thousand pounds for me when all liabilities were cleared off. But I had kept the old man's books, or most of them. Certainly I had kept all his favourites, and when you took possession last month, I had already removed these from the hall.

"My position was more desperate than I cared to think of. I was pledged to marry, and that speedily, and I had not the wherewithal even for a bachelor existence without work, and I had never been brought up to work. It was only the day before yesterday that I took down the old copy of Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici* from among the books which had been my grandfather's favourites. I had stowed them away on rough shelves, at the village inn where I had taken up my quarters after the disbandment of the Hall servants, and I almost regretted that I had not sold them all with the other things. For how was I to cart them about if

my life were to be as strenuous as it promised?

"I was sorry for Maggie. She had wept bitterly on hearing of the change in our prospects, and I always feel more tender when a woman suffers disappointment."

Of course it could not matter to me really in what light I appeared to Sylvia Dumergue, nor could it interest her to hear of my love affairs. Yet I could not help hoping that she would not think I was a love-sick loon, a maudlin ass, broken up in the strength of his youth by an uxoriousness for a woman I had not yet made my 'uxor' whether 'placens' or not.

But the lovely majestic creature made no sign that she was moved by my story. Why should she care? Yet it irked me to see that she did not. Of course I loved Maggie; yes, very dearly. There was no doubt of that. I was her own true lover, her champion who would save her from the dragon of domestic indigence in some way or other. Dear Maggie. I could have kicked my heart to wake it to a fervour of love for Maggie. She was virtually my wife. God bless her! I continued.

"I opened the old edition, in which I had seen my grandfather read so often, and out there fell into my hands a half sheet of note-paper in the old man's writing.

"It's all in the secret recess of the library," ran the writing. 'Harry, boy, you'll find a small knob in the panel against the second angel's head of the carved marble mantel on the left of it. Press, and you'll see why I borrowed money. The stones were cheap,

and I could not part with the gold. Not with that.'

"It was the heart cry of a dying miser. He longed to buy the jewels because they were 'cheap.' Probably they were brought from overseas by some rough sailor who had put in at the mouth of the Blyth, and who had got them in ways about which it is better not to be too inquisitive. However that might be, no one knew whence they came but my grandfather, and he was dead. He must have stored up gold. But he could not part with it, so he had mortgaged and sub-mortgaged the hall and estate. And the jewels and gold were hidden in a secret recess in the library of the old hall which I had just sold. If the writing did not mean that, what could it mean? But I had sold the hall and its contents, save what I had already removed, and although there was no specific mention of any jewels or treasure, yet would not these pass to the purchaser under the general words of sale? I did not know who were the real purchasers of the hall. I only knew that they were believed to be foreigners, and that was not enough to give me sufficient confidence in them to trust them with the discovery I had made. Had it not been for Maggie, I might have chanced it, though, to be honest, I doubt it. But I dared not run the risk of giving away my secret before I had verified the old man's writing. I did not know who was in the house, for, as you must admit, you have kept very quiet here.



But I did know that some one had taken possession. I also knew that I was as familiar with the old house as with the palm of my hand. Surely if any one could effect a secret entry I could, who had been used to prying into all the quaint nooks and crannies of the old place ever since I was a boy. And morally, if there were anything hidden away in a secret recess which represented the wealth which was missing, I was the real owner of it. I should not be guilty of any iniquitous crime by taking my own. I determined to perpetrate what I still consider to be an innocent burglary. It was as much, or more, for Maggie's sake as for my own. There you have the story, and, I suppose that, notwithstanding it, I am at your mercy, for legally I had no right to break into a house that was no longer mine. Whatever you determine I have told you the truth, and you must form your own judgment upon it. *Dixi.*"

I reached out my hand for the glass of aromatic wine which stood ready poured out for me, and I drained it at a draught. I had made my confession, and they must make the best of it. Perhaps I had dwelt on my relations with Maggie Ramsbotham with an emphasis that had something more in it than what genuine affection for either the lady to whom I was engaged or for truth could account for. Perhaps there was a certain bravado in the manner in which I had dwelt on my concern for Maggie.

I looked up, round me, at all three, when I

replaced my glass on the salver. They were all three smiling, and even as I sought their thoughts in their looks, the Duke rose from his seat and held out his hand.

"My friend," said he, "were there no other interests concerned but those of us present I would bid you go to yonder hiding-place and take your wealth, and welcome. But chance has placed in our hands a man who is, we all think, the one of all others to carry out a venture which may be all important for France, poor France, and for our mistress, the Empress Eugénie. But this I can say. Pledge us your word to do your best to carry out the enterprise which we shall unfold to you, and I still say take what is yours. I will not hint at what course we might be compelled to pursue should you decline to join us."

"But he will not decline," said the girl hastily, coming forward towards me, and looking me full in the eyes. "If he does I shall have to go alone to France, to go alone to rescue the Empress's treasures and put them to use in the service of France as she bids. And this gentleman would not, I am sure, be so ungallant as to let a country-woman who appeals to him in such circumstances as I do appeal in vain."

Caution and Maggie were forgotten as I leapt to my feet and took her hand and kissed it. "No! By God!" I cried. "Let the things remain where they are. You will guarantee their safety. I am yours to do

your bidding until the task be ended. Tell me how I can serve you."

Sylvia blushed and withdrew her hand. "But how of the lady to whom you are pledged?" she asked.

I felt a cold shudder run through me. It was a pertinent question. How, indeed, of Maggie. "She must know nothing," said I. "Surely my loyalty to her does not involve disloyalty to you. And yours is the more pressing need if it be for France."

"Egad, you know, m'mselle," said the Duke, with a chuckle and a glance at the Comte d'Arthenay. "He's right there. Then we'll introduce ourselves. This lady," he said, "is Miss Sylvia Dumergue, the daughter of Latimer Dumergue, the London financier, of whom you may have heard. I am the Duc de Touraine, and this, my friend and comrade, is the Comte d'Arthenay. Mr. Dumergue is in the house—probably snoring in his bed. We need not disturb him. I understand you give your word to do your utmost in the service we propose to you, and to be loyal, faithful and discreet unto secrecy."

"Yes," I said. "Of course on the understanding that when I have done my work the gold and valuables in the recess shall be mine."

"Nay," said the Duke, "and the house and estate too, my friend. Only succeed and there are great things before you."

"Tell me of what the hazard consists," said I.

"Tell him," cried the lady and the Count together.

## CHAPTER III

### THE UNDERSTANDING

THE Duke's face became more grave, and the lines round his mouth and eyes more pronounced, before he spoke. "I can do no more than commence the story," said he. "It is for m'selle to fill in the details. She, more than either of us men, is in the secrets of her Imperial mistress, and it must be for her to come to such an agreement with Mr. Fisher as may be thought opportune."

Sylvia Dumergue swung her body impatiently in a half circle, and flashed out, "I'm ready, as soon as ever you have got over your preliminaries. But we are keeping this gentleman waiting."

She swept the skirt of her gown round her limbs in graceful folds, and took a seat on my side of the fireplace. The Count sat next me, in front of the expiring embers (which no one had thought to revive), and the Duke on the farther side, facing me.

"You know the state of France, I take it," said he. "Though I find that here in the provinces most English people are either ignorant of or indifferent to the sorrow of our country, a man of your education can hardly be in such a state of darkness. Moreover,

you said that if France were to be helped there was no time to lose—and no one could have summed up the situation better than that."

"Yes, yes," said I, a little impatiently, for I wanted the Frenchman to "cut the cackle and get to the hosses." "I've followed the course of the war as far as is possible from our English papers."

"That'll do," said the Duke, with a sneer which was not aimed at me. "You are far better posted than those who have only French journals to consult. But though you have a general notion of the course of our tragedy, you can hardly know the undercurrents of intrigue in which we (who are here with you), on behalf of our mistress, are interested. To be brief, you know that Bazaine is shut up in Metz with 180,000 men and guns and war material in proportion. You know that he is and has always been an Imperialist, and that there is now no Imperial Government in France. But what you don't know is that Bazaine is suspected of trafficking with the Prussian Red Prince Frederick Charles, and that it is doubtful whether he does this out of loyalty to the empire or out of sheer avaricious treachery towards France. A month or so ago a certain M. Regnier came to Hastings and sought an audience with the Empress. He represented that he came on behalf of Bazaine, and that the general suggested that terms might be arranged with the Prussian army whereby the Metz army

should be at liberty to replace the Empress in power as Regent with the Prince Imperial as future Emperor, or that Bazaine himself should be Regent. But this we need not go into. The Empress refused to see Regnier, and though he got a photograph of her house at Hastings signed by the Prince Imperial as a kind of voucher for him, he left without effecting anything. There are many who regard him as merely an impostor. And in a sense I think that he deserves that title. But certain hints which he let drop and certain information which he possessed made it clear that he was behind the scenes of the great Metz drama. He had been in Metz. He had seen both Bazaine and the Red Prince. There could be no doubt about that. And the one thing he hinted which was of deadly importance was that if the Empress did not make terms with the Prussians through the intervention of Bazaine, Bazaine himself would take the three millions of francs which were offered him to surrender both town and army. Regnier was a sly rascal. He proved to us that Bazaine had accepted a bribe to leave Canrobert to his fate at Gravelotte; that he purposely refrained from using the splendid Imperial Guard when the Prussian attack was routed and flying in panic, and that had he launched the cavalry of the guard at the proper time old William, Moltke and Steinmetz would have suffered such a reverse as would have changed the course of the war for a time, if not entirely.

After I and the Count were convinced that he knew what he was speaking of (so far as this was concerned), we, as the chief advisers of Her Imperial Majesty, sought an audience, and suggested that she should ask for General Bourbaki to come over to consult with her. Bourbaki came, but the Empress decided that inasmuch as the nation had deposed the Bonaparte dynasty, she would not be justified in negotiating with the enemy on behalf of France, and still less justified in using the Metz army as pretorians to impose an unwelcome empire by force of arms. But what terrified her was the fear of Bazaine's treachery. She knew the man, perhaps better than the Emperor did, and she believed that the person who bribed the highest would command him and his fealty. But how could she get at him to bribe him—for, noble in her patriotism to an ungrateful country, all her thought was to save the army of Metz for France, and to prevent the shameful surrender of which both Regnier and Bourbaki had spoken? She could not place valuables for bribery in the hands of an honourable man like Bourbaki, even if he were not a subordinate officer of the Marshal's. But get to Bazaine in some way or other she must. In her haste, she chose badly. She trusted a man who was honest enough in his way, but who was a poltroon. His name need not be mentioned between us. We only have to do with his failure, and at this point I think m'mselle should commence her story,

for she knew more of the actual mission and of what the messenger whom the Empress despatched to Bazaine carried than any one else. Since her good father Latimer Dumergue came to the assistance of the Empress on her landing in England his daughter has been the most intimate friend of Her Majesty, and her courage and resource have done much to keep up Her Majesty's courage in a time of unspeakable anxiety and grief."

The Duke's waxed tips shot up the sides of his face in a smile, as he rose and bowed with elaborate courtesy. Then he reseated himself, lit a cigarette as a sign that he had done, and looked at the lady.

She turned in her chair, and gazed at me, full in the face. Then her lips parted a little, and her eyes lit up and glowed. "Oh!" she cried. "I know you'll save us! You'll get back what that cowardly wretch abandoned!"

This was gratifying and complimentary, but it did not elucidate the situation greatly. She was no babbling fool, and she knew that she had spoken rather with a woman's impulse than with the terse pertinence of a man in earnest.

She now spoke to the point indeed. But her feminine charm continued, and made her telling of her story infinitely more interesting, more graphic and enthralling, than had been the concise clear-cut information which the Duke had imparted. At least so it seemed to me.



She clasped her hands, and rushed into a torrent of speech.

"The Empress would give all, all for France! Those foolish and wicked people who deposed her have no knowledge of the grandeur of her character. Oh I shall always bless my father's wealth for having put it in his power to be of use to her, and so to bring me before her gracious notice. Who was I, the daughter of a mere city capitalist, to be made a friend of by her, the most beautiful and the most charming woman in the world! When she heard that Bazaine had not only been a traitor already but was brooding over a still greater act of treason, she called me to her and sent all others from her presence. 'Child,' said she to me, 'there's only one thing that man loves, that is his own self-importance, and in his eyes the one influence to bring him into prominence is wealth. Could the Empire have been revived he would have remained true to it, because he believed his interests were mixed up with it. But all those proposals of that man Regnier were mere *blague*, mere silly bravado. No one can reinstate us but the French themselves. So Bazaine knows at heart, and he was never in earnest in any suggestion that the Prussians would make terms with me. He means to take their millions. But how if I offer him a greater bribe? I believe he is faithful enough to do what he is bribed to do. I have jewels worth at least five million francs. M. C—— shall take them to Metz, shall get

through the lines by hook or by crook—it can be managed, trust me—and shall offer my jewels to Bazaine if he will only play the man and use the splendid force which he has to the best of his great ability and in the best interests of France—that is to say, to crush the enemy, or at least to inflict as much damage upon him as he can.”

“You’ll pardon me, m’mselle,” interrupted the Duke, “this is all very interesting and true, but time is running on, and our friend here should be away before daylight. Tell him briefly what happened to the jewels and what is desired to be done.”

I was furious with the man for his interruption. But, although he had the air of a Frenchman (never so manly as an Englishman to my mind), there was a certain distinction, a presence, about him, which prevented me from showing my feelings. As for Sylvia, she blushed prettily and apologized. “I will,” said she. “I will.”

Then she rested her chin on her folded hands and her elbows on her knees, and continued her story.

“To be brief, as the Duke reminds me I should be, the Empress placed her jewels (or most of them) in a despatch box and sent for M. C——. He is a man of many words and of much pretence, but the moment I saw him I doubted if he were the man to carry out the scheme. He was so obtrusively courageous. I felt sure that no one in this world could be so impervious to danger as

he made himself out to be. I have no wish to be disrespectful, but perhaps the Empress's kindness and generosity make her a poor judge of character. However that may be, she was deceived by the bluffing plausibility of the man. Perhaps I am unjust. Perhaps he would have done his best to carry the jewels into Metz and to make the offer of them to Bazaine in exchange for his promise of fidelity to France had he met with no obstruction on his way. But the poor man must needs work his way by Orleans, for he had heard that there was a French army forming in that neighbourhood, and he imagined that he would be the safer on that account. As soon as he got to Orleans there were rumours of Prussians in the district. The Republican government (then at Tours) got hold of the fact that he was an Imperial emissary, and sent North to Orleans to see what he was about. This came to his ears, and he believed himself to be between the devil and the deep sea, for if the Prussians were terrible to him, with his five million francs' worth of jewels, the Republican Government was scarcely less so, for the hatred of the Gambetta fraternity for the Empire was far more bitter than the feeling of the Germans. A man of resource and courage would have pushed on at all hazards, or at least would never have relinquished the trust imposed upon him. But this wretched man fell in a terror of fright. He gained entrance to a château just outside Orleans to the

North called the Château de Quatre Cheminées, an old country hall which had been deserted by its owners on the advance of the Prussians, and one which was familiar to M. C——. And here, in just such a secret recess as this, he hid that great treasure of jewels. Then he made his way to Havre and got a passage across to England, whence he at once took ship for America, leaving a letter for the Empress which contained the first tidings which came to us of his failure and of the hiding of the jewels. The Empress is so disheartened by his futility that she refuses to trust the secret of the jewels to any one but myself and these two friends of ours. Even my father is ignorant of the matter. And it is of vital necessity that the jewels should be taken into Metz by some one and offered to Bazaine. But who can do it if her Majesty will not authorize us to take any other Frenchman into our confidence?"

"Why not one of these two gentlemen?" I ventured to ask.

"Oh, they are only too willing," said she. "But they are so well known, and are hated by the government at Tours and by the Prussians alike. There is only myself left, and I have only waited for a comrade before setting out. It is a venture of fearful risk. The chances are in favour of any emissary falling into the hands of either the government or the enemy, and being treated as a spy."

But I would wait no longer. I understood. She wished me to go and take the jewels

from their hiding place in that château of four chimneys, and make my way into Metz to try to bribe the Marshal to be honourable.

"Of course I'll go," I cried. "I would never permit myself to remember that I allowed a countrywoman to go on such an errand when she trusted me to do it for her."

Sylvia laughed. "You are kind," said she. "But I shall go with you."

"You?" I cried. At first I was overjoyed by the thought that she would be my comrade. Then I thought of Maggie. What would she say if I went careering over France in war time with a lady of the personal attractions of Sylvia Dumergue?

Sylvia guessed my trouble and laughed again. "We must keep our journey secret," said she. "No one at all must know whither you are bent or with whom."

Well, there was that. Maggie need never know.

"And your father?" I asked. "I understand that he is here. Will he permit you to go off in such a way?"

"He shall be told about it when it is all over—not before," said Sylvia, with a laugh.

"Come, come," said the Duke, as both he and the Comte d'Arthenay rose to their feet with some show of impatience. "Dawn is near, and there is no time to waste. You have no choice, my friend. You deprived yourself of any option you may have had the moment you permitted yourself to be caught in the act of burglary. Ta-ta-ta. I know

that morally it was no crime. But it has given us the advantage, and we cannot afford to forego it. You have shown yourself an adept in finding secret recesses, and in quiet housebreaking—though we did happen to come upon you at an unfortunate time for yourself. But you could not guess that we three were discussing the Empress's affairs late into the morning when Mr. Dumergue was peacefully sleeping and could not interrupt us. Come. You are our man, and there's no escape for you. Make the best of it like a gallant gentleman. After all, there might surely be worse fates than a few strenuous days of hazard in the company of this young lady."

"Oh, this is no time for silly compliments," Sylvia broke out. "And you misunderstand Mr. Fisher. He has no intention of withdrawing. That is not the reason of his hesitation. Trust me," she said, turning to me, "and I will arrange everything for the best for you. Apart from the danger we shall share together you shall suffer no wrong or scathe either in yourself or in the person of any one you—you—care for."

It puzzled me to find that I was glad she had not used the word "love," which I saw trembling on her lips. What on earth did it matter to me whether she spoke of those I loved or those I cared for? And yet I realized that it would have irked me sorely to hear her speak of my "love" for others. Why, I could not for the life of me guess.

Even as I wondered at my sensations I cried out in answer, "I have never hesitated as to accepting the quest of the jewels. I was but thinking over one or two points. Of course I'll go. I pledge myself here and now to the service."

I held out my hand with as great an appearance of *bonhomie* as I could assume. I did not think the better of the Frenchmen for fearing to risk their skins in the hazard on the ground that they were well known and better hated by both French and Germans. But my heart was uplifted within me by the glorious spirit of the girl. I was proud that she was a genuine English woman in spite of her Frenchified name.

The three grasped my hand, but the girl's was the warmest and the most tingling clasp. I could have gathered courage from the pressure of her fingers, had I been in any want of that commodity.

"Be here to breakfast, lunch, whatever you call it, to-morrow," said the Duke. "Come a little before noon. Till then, good-bye. Remember you have given your word, and that your honour is bound up in your fidelity to us and our cause. Remember——"

"Oh!" cried Sylvia, "as if talking would make a man faithful. Either Mr. Fisher is an honourable gentleman or he is not. We have decided to treat him as a man of his word. This repeated warning is both insulting and absurd."

I think she did not like the notion of a

Frenchman, Duke though he was, daring to utter menaces to a fellow-countryman of hers. She spoke with a wonderful freedom and disregard of the Duke's possible susceptibilities that impressed me with the fact that after all she was the real leader of the venture. It had been to her in the first instance that the Empress had entrusted the task, in her that she had chiefly confided. This made me all the more willing to engage in the enterprise.

"All right," said I. "I'll be here."

"You must be prepared to start tomorrow," said the Duke. "Can you arrange a passage from this coast?"

"Leave that to me," I cried.

"You understand that you must sail secretly, and that it would be fatal to go over by the ordinary routes."

"Lord, man, yes," said I. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

"No, sir," said the Duke, with a bow; "or we should never ask for your assistance in a matter of such delicacy and difficulty. But I may as well tell you now that we have had an eye upon you for some time, and but for your personality it is likely that we should not have bought your house. Though we had no guess at what would have to be done, we knew that there would be work to do from this side, and we looked round us for a good quiet shelter and for an Englishman whom we could trust. Fortune threw you in our power. That is all. No, sir; we do not think you are a fool."



"That's all right, then," said I, a little cavalierly.

"And these?" asked the Duke, pointing to the bags of treasure in the recess behind the panel. "Will you leave them here with us as hostages?"

"We do not ask for that," Sylvia broke in. "You are at liberty to take them one and all now at once if you wish."

Once more the girl had showed that she trusted where she did trust with all her soul. I hesitated, but I could not carry away the bags of gold without the help of a horse and cart, and it would look better if I left the precious stones also. So I said, "No, I'll leave it where it is till we get back from Metz or wherever fate takes us. Some of the gold will be useful on our travels, and that I'll take to-morrow. In the meantime I leave all here as a hostage for my honesty, as you were good enough to suggest," said I to the Duke.

He made a gesture of deprecation, but I could see that he was well pleased.

"You know we don't ask you for this?" insisted the girl.

I took her hand in mine again and raised it to my lips.

She let her fingers rest in mine without any attempt to withdraw them.

"Now," I thought to myself, as I turned to go, "why the deuce did I do that? And what would Maggie say?"

"Till to-morrow at noon, then," I said.

Then I bent my steps in the direction of the window which was still open, and through which the night wind was now blowing keen with the approach of dawn. It was curious that no one had thought to close it.

"Are you leaving us by the way you came?" asked the Duke, smiling somewhat sardonically.

"I think so," said I, nodding. "You see it's the quietest, and I presume you don't want any more witnesses of this interview."

"Quite so," replied the Frenchman. "Till to-morrow, or to be accurate, till noon to-day."

I swung my leg over the sill and dropped the few inches to the terrace. As I began to walk towards the ride through the woods in the direction of the village I looked up. Silhouetted against the light which still streamed from the window I saw the three faces of my new acquaintances.

Did Sylvia throw me a wave of the hand? Hang it! What if she did? What was she to me or I to her beyond comrades in adventure? I would see Maggie before I returned to the Hall, for it was doubtful if I should have another opportunity before sailing. And I must arrange about the passage.

I hurried through the darkness to the inn. But I knew that there was no time for sleep. Till we were away every moment must be spent in work of some kind. I could sleep going over.

## CHAPTER IV

### I CHARTER A VESSEL

**M**Y way led me towards the river, and before I reached the inn, whither I had intended to make my way when I left the old manor-house, an idea came to me which changed the direction of my footsteps. I had undertaken to see to our passage across to France. The Duke was clearly right in maintaining that we must not go by the regular routes, but secretly, for the mission on which we were bound was one which could not be disclosed, and, without such papers as it would be impossible for us to get, it would never do for us to be subjected to any examination by the customs. The mere fact of two English folk crossing to France at such a time was in itself suspicious. There were 700,000 Germans in France, and, though most of them were round Metz and Paris, there were bodies of invading troops in the central provinces nearly as far west as Orleans, while Manteuffel was here, there and everywhere in the north. And it was to Orleans that we must make our way—and we were to the north. There was also the French Fleet to be considered, for though this did little enough during the war, it might make itself

very unpleasant for any doubtful craft endeavouring to land a passenger on French territory. And the French Fleet was now mostly in the North Sea. Everything called for secrecy and caution. As emissaries of the Empress we should be regarded as enemies by the government of France. As friends to France we should be treated as French spies if the Germans caught us! A cheerful outlook. One thing was certain. To whatever port or more private landing-place we decided to sail we should have to charter a craft to ourselves. And I remembered that on the bare sweep of sand and marum which stretched on the south side of the mouth of the river Blyth till the rise to Southwold began, there lived an old fisherman whom I had known since I could toddle. Old Joe Thaxter's weather-boarding hut, with its delicious smell of tar, and its delightful mysteries of cordage and netting, basket work and sails, was one of my earliest, and quite my dearest, recollections of childhood. Old Joe and I had always been friends. He had "brote our young maaster up to be a sailor maan," he boasted, when I grew to manhood. And he and his stalwart sons, young Joe (a man of forty and odd years), Sam, and Fred (more commonly known as "Rumbo," "Doubler" and "Dory" respectively) owned a stout dandy-rigged herring drifter between them, and were as fine fishermen and seamen as could be found even along that coast of splendid North Sea folk. If I could trust any one

I could trust these men. I believed that any one of them would have died with complacency and satisfaction rather than be guilty of a breach of trust, or a neglect of duty, which should endanger me or mine. I made up my mind then and there that I would go to the hut upon the denes, and see if old Joe were there. The herring season was in full swing, so that it was possible the old man and all his sons might be at sea.

I passed through the quaint old houses of Walberswick and reached the dilapidated horse ferry which one-armed Sam had ground backwards and forwards, from one side of the river to the other, ever since I could recollect. There was now a breath of dawn in the air and scattered lights appeared in the cottage windows, where the few labouring men who lived in that settlement of fishermen and smugglers were preparing for their day's work. I saw a glimmer of light in the shelter for the ferryman beside the staithe. Oho! What was one-armed Sam doing about at that hour of the morning? It seemed to me, too, as though there had been more lights in the village than the one or two labouring men who dwelt there could account for. There were folk awake. Probably this meant folk expectant, or busy. For in those days there was still a bit of freetrading done on favourable occasions.

Sam was awake and alert in his shelter. Certainly there was something going on. The ferryman had no fear of me.

"Did ye see anything o' coastguard, Maaster Hinnery?" said he. "Huf an hour he can come when he like. But gi'e us just another huf hour ta git the last o' the goods stowed. He! he! he! But what be yew a dewin' on, bor, up sa 'arly. Be ye a gooin' arter the fowl in the meshes? But yew hain't got no gun. Wha lor, Maaster Hinnery, yew bain't dewin' a bit o' smugglin' surelie!"

Ah! So there *was* something on. And ten to one my friends the Thaxters were in it. If so, I should find some one at the hut. Smuggling paid better than herring fishing in those days, before the silver fish of the North Sea realized the enormous prices of recent years.

"I want to see old Joe, Sam," said I. "Put me across. Will you, please?"

"Sartinly, bor," said Sam, who was no great respecter of persons. "But yew want ta be keerful how ye goo or yew may git a bit o' lead in ye afore yew be reckernized. Listen yew here. Whistle like this here as ye walk."

He whistled the first two bars of "The cobbler and the sailor's wife," and kept time to his whistling with the twist of the crank by which he dragged the unwieldy pontoon across. There was a strong scour of ebb, and the chain groaned and creaked against the old wooden sides of the boat as she was borne down till the side of her which was to seaward came almost level with the rush of the

tide. "Hold yew on, maaster," said one-armed Sam. "There's a rum funny tide this moarnin'. Ah! Yew'll fare all right. There's a light in the hut, and all's finished well. Now Bob Crabbe the coostguard can come when he like, and be hanged tew'm."

I slipped sixpence into Sam's hand and told him to be on the look-out for my return. Then, whistling the tune of the scandalous song already mentioned, I made my way across what the Scotch folk would call the "bents" of the sand and marum to the glimmer of light, which showed like a pin point in the lonely hut by the shore.

The sky was now showing a dim grey to the east. The heavy clouds of a dull October day had made the night and early morning pitch dark, but, faint as it was, that promise of dawn over the sea took much of the glamour and power from that light in the hut. In the growing dawn I saw a shadow or two flit silently by towards the inland roads. Some led donkeys, with old-fashioned panniers upon them. Away at the back of the Southwold hill I heard the creak and rattle of a cart.

I could see the difference between the grass and the sand at my feet by the time I reached the hut. This was a tarred wooden building, with a roof made of the bottom of an old beach yawl. It had a window on each side, north and south, and in front, facing the sea, there were two windows and a hatchway. A flag-post stood, reaching up into the darkness,

near the front opening of the hut. As I approached I noticed that the light which had helped to lead my steps (for familiar as I was with the place the extreme darkness might have made my way difficult before the east grew grey) disappeared.

I walked up to the front of the hut, and listened. There was complete and absolute silence inside that hut. But I doubted if that candle was not still burning, and, for that matter, still throwing light in the same quarter as before. I had merely passed beyond its range of meaning. That was all.

I laughed as I listened. Crafty old Joe would not be caught napping if he could help it!

But I knew his secret signal, and tapped on the weather-boarding thrice, quickly and lightly, with the knuckle of one clenched finger. Then I smote the wooden walls softly, with open palm, four times.

"Whew is 't?" rumbled a voice, the volume of which only seemed intensified by the speaker's effort at restraint.

"Let me in, Joe," said I. "You know my voice."

"Wha, it's young Maaster Hinnery!" cried old Joe's sonorous voice. "Ler him in, Rumbo. Dee yew brooch that old cask unner the sprat nets. Doubler bor, I reckon our maaster can dew with a drop o' warmth."

There was a sound of the withdrawing of bolts, and the tightly fitting hatchway and door in front of the hut opened, and showed



me the cosy interior, dimly lit with two candles, one of which was placed in such a manner as to throw its light without only in the certain line of direction in which I had seen it on my approach.

Old Joe sat on an empty fish trunk by the American stove, the pipe of which projected through the keel of the boat which formed the roof. "Wha come yew in an' walcome," he said, in his deep rumbling voice. "Dory he ha' gone Lowestoft way with a dickey load what come ashore ta-night. Ah!" the old fellow added, with a wink that was worthy of a rhinoceros. "Prowidence fare very marci-ful ta us pore feeshin' folk, an' some o' the blessin's come up last flood."

Much as I delighted to hear the old man's smuggling yarns I had no time nor inclination to listen to them then.

Doubler brought forward a can of neat Hollands the very look of which was enough for me.

"Not now," said I. "See here, Joe, and you too, Rumbo and Doubler. Is the *Kitti-wake* in the river, or have you anchored her off?"

"She lay about half a mile out, maaster," said Joe. "We wuz a goin' feeshin' ta-night, but we heerd as there was someat better a-goin' in the bay."

"That's all right," said I. "Now I want to charter her, with you and your three sons for a crew, to take me and a friend over to France. I'll pay you whatever you think fair.

Name your own price. I don't think you'll run any danger beside the ordinary hazards of the sea. But you may be sure that if anything goes wrong I'll see you don't suffer in your pockets."

"Tha'ss the way to talk!" said Joe admiringly. "But where did ye want ta sail tew? T'other side o' the No'th Sea or Channel way?"

Now I had been thinking over this. If Manteuffel was in force in the north of France it would never do to land on the French side of the Channel. Furthermore the French Fleet would be more in evidence between Cherbourg and Brest than anywhere else. It seemed as if the only promising course to set would be for the Bay, and how Joe would like venturing his drifter in the Bay of Biscay in October was more than I could tell.

From Calais to Havre there was fear of the Germans. From Havre to Brest of the French Fleet, which were, curiously enough, blockading their own ports lest the Germans should bring in provisions and war material by sea. There seemed no place on the north coast of France where we could land with any likelihood of escaping notice either on sea or land. But to the west there was more scope. No German was west of Orleans, if our war correspondents could be relied upon. The only French force in the field which could be called an army was at Bourges, on the Loire. And the Loire joins the sea at Nantes—the name of which town in the Charente

would, I suspected, bring recollections of what used to be called the "right Nantz" to old Joe.

"Neither," said I, in answer to the old fellow. "The only chance I have of doing what I wish to do (and I'll tell you this, Joe, it means a lot to me) is to bring the *Kittiwake* round Ushant into the Bay. Did ye ever run in to Nantes?"

Again Joe gave that tremendous wink of his.

"Did I iver run in ta Narnce?" said he. "Ah! I ha' been in there for, shall us say for bait—Haw! haw! haw!—a sight o' times when I wuz a youngster. Doan't they sell brarndy there, maaster? Hay? Haw! haw! haw! So yew're a thinkin' of a little run! An' the more praise for ye, say I."

"Tha'ss right," said Rumbo and Doubler, in joyous tones.

"No," said I. "I'm sorry to disappoint ye. But I shall take no cargo aboard. What you take will not concern me. All I want you to do is to carry me and my friend over to the Bay, land us secretly somewhere near the mouth of the river that runs out at Nantes, and leave us there. A fortnight later you must hang on and off by night, and be ready to send a boat in to the place where you have landed us on seeing a flare from the beach. Now what d'ye say? Will ye do what I want?"

"Tha'ss Octoober," said Doubler. "We may find some funny seas in the Bay."

"Seas!" cried old Joe. "Lor, wha'ss the good of a feesherman if he care for a bit of a lipper! Why when I wuz a lad I'd ha' took a jolly boat where they darsen't go wi' the life-boat now!"

He spat contemptuously, and I knew that he was at my service. The old man was close on seventy, but as hard and enduring as most men thirty years younger.

"When did ye want ta sail?" he asked. "Dory oan't be back afore tea time. And we ought ta hev him."

"Not till to-night's ebb," said I. "When the night has fallen. By the way, if we run in with any of the French Fleet we shall want some excuse if we are near their coast."

"We'll cach a harrin' or tew," said Joe. "Then there's not a port in the Bay as oan't walcome us. Lave that ta me. Yew be down wi' what yew want arter fall o' dark, an' go yew about twanty or thutty yard no'th o' the no'th pier head. Yew'll see some on us there with the boat. Lor! What a lark; I reckon yew'll larn us more when yew git aboard."

I readily promised to do this. I could make up some tale between then and night time. I shook hands with all three on the bargain, and turned to go back to Soleby.

"Hold yew hard," said old Joe. "Will a hunnerd pounds hurt ye for the passage? We might make that a feeshin' in the time."

I knew that it was unlikely that they would do so, however plentiful they found the her-

ring. But I did not think the price exorbitant considering where they had to go. Of course I knew that there would be more to pay for the return passage.

"I'll bring two hundred with me," said I, "in case we come to grief ashore. For you must come back for us, as I have told you."

"Yew're a gennleman, sir," said old Joe, awed by me for the first time in his life. It was the sound of mighty "brass" that cowed his manly spirit. "Then we'll look for ye; well, that'll be about eight o'clock, I reckon."

Off I strode, back again over the ferry, where one-armed Sam was eager to learn what I had seen of the smuggling. It was now broad daylight, and I felt that I had a lot to do before the sun which was peeping over the North Sea to the east'ard would die flaming above Blythburgh.

First I returned to the inn, and made such arrangements as I thought advisable. I did not definitely say I was going away, but I said I might be called away for a fortnight or three weeks, and I got everything locked up which I did not wish to leave to the general inspection of the village. It was just ten when I went to the vicarage to see Maggie. I had no intention of telling her anything that had happened on the previous night, or of my venture to France. But I thought I should like to have one look at the girl to whom I was engaged, just one more look before I sailed. I could have sworn to myself when I saw her come languidly into the morning room. Why

was it that a comparison leapt to life in my thoughts between her and Sylvia Dumergue ?

Maggie was a typical English country girl, fair, blue-eyed, apple-cheeked, light-brown haired, and buxom. She had been a winsome girl of seventeen. But now that she was twenty-two she seemed to have lost piquancy. She looked wholesome, but flavourless. And I had, the night before, committed burglary for her sake !

"Well, Harry," said she—— "No, don't. You'll make my hair untidy." (Ah ! I could remember when she cared little whether her hair was tidy or untidy provided she pleased me !) "How early you've come !"

"I find that I have to go away for a fortnight or so," said I.

"Oh," she said, looking more anxious than sorry. "Does father know ?"

"I've only just come to know it myself," said I, a little petulantly. I was vexed with the coolness of this girl of whom I had thought so much, for whom I had felt so tender a solicitude that I had braced myself to crime for her.

I had to make some excuse. "It's connected with the sale of the manor," said I. "The Duc de Touraine has asked me to clear up one or two things, and I don't think it's worth while to refuse him."

"The Duck de Touraing !" said Maggie. (Her French accent was always atrocious. So different from Sylvia Dumergue !) "Why, Harry, who is he ?"

"Oh," said I, playing down the snobbishness I suspected her of possessing, and despising myself while I did so. "I find I've sold the place to some very big pots. There's the Duc de Touraine, the Comte d'Arthenay, and a man whose name you'll know better, Latimer Dumergue, the millionaire."

In those days millionaires were not as common as blackberries in September, and Dumergue's name was famous wherever the daily press reached. The vicar took his *Times* religiously, and even he and Maggie had heard of Dumergue.

"Oh!" said Maggie. "How nice! And have they come to live here? You must take up father and introduce him at once, Harry, before you go. Is—is Mr. Dumergue married?"

"He's got a daughter as old as you are," said I, with a laugh, "so I suppose so."

(I did not know that he had lost his wife more than twelve years previously. And, after all, I did not mislead my betrothed for long.)

I fancied her mouth drooped a little at this, but perhaps it was at the news of my going. I took it for the latter.

"But you *will* take father up before you go, won't you?" persisted Maggie.

Just then the vicar himself came swaggering in. He was a short, stout perky man of forty-five, the bully and tyrant of his house, the lickspittle and toad-eater in houses where he was tolerated for his powers of telling

risky stories, and the insinuating cleric in those simple establishments where his cloth found a welcome for him. He wore no hair on his face, his snub nose tilted back to the perpendicular so high did he carry his double chin. His pug-like face and his squat figure and coarse nostrils and mouth gave him the look of a retired prizefighter. He looked better fitted by nature for the ring than for the pulpit. But he lacked a very necessary quality for success in the ring, for he was a coward from his bald head to his square toes.

"Hullo, Fisher!" said he. "Come to arrange about the wedding? You've got a few thousands together now, my boy, and you ought not to keep my girl waiting longer. I was only saying to mother yesterday that I thought you ought to pay for her keep, begad! Ho! ho! ho!"

"Oh, father!" cried Maggie. "Whoever do you think has bought the manor? There's a duke, and a count something and Mr. Dumergue the millionaire, and Harry is going to take you there this morning to introduce you!"

I rather kicked at this. "I really hardly know them well enough for that," said I.

"Oh, of course I shall call," said the vicar pompously. "It is my duty as vicar." An idea seemed to strike him. He looked at me with less friendly eyes. "You ought to come too, dear," said he to his daughter. "But we won't go with Fisher. I will go with you to-morrow. Of course your mother can't go. She's always busy or ill or something. No.



You and I will give ourselves the pleasure of waiting upon these gentlemen to-morrow. You might just mention it up there, Fisher," he added to me in a patronizing manner. "Seem easy-going folk with you? Eh?"

But I was not going to discuss the French people or the millionaire (whom I had not yet seen) with the vicar. "You are sure to find them gracious," said I, with half a sneer. "But I must be going. I have to lunch there to-day before I start on a bit of business for the Duke which will keep me away a fortnight or three weeks."

"Indeed?" sniffed the vicar. "To lunch with them? Ah! And may I know where you are going?"

"Certainly, if the Duke likes to tell you," said I. "You must ask him. It is on his business. That's all I'm at liberty to tell you."

"Ah," said Ramsbotham. "Well, I suppose we must leave the wedding till you come back. Good-bye."

He puffed out of the room. He had almost closed the door when he re-opened it and called out, as if by an after-thought, "You know my girl has no need to be anxious for such a husband as you can make her now. But of course her word is given. Good-bye."

The old rascal! He had given away his hopes to any one less dull than I was. I merely thought he had given another exhibition of his usual lack of taste, and let the impertinence slip from my mind.

I took Maggie in my arms, and I felt more tender towards her. It was not her fault if she had a boor for a father. I must rescue her from this sordid tyranny, this sorry indigence. Of course I must. Why was it necessary for me to insist on that in my mind? I loved her. Of course I did. I kissed her, and I felt my lips were quite warm. Of course I loved her. It would break my heart to lose her. Dear Maggie!

Maggie seemed a little preoccupied. She accepted my kisses with complacency, but made no attempt to reply to them.

"Will you write, Harry?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I shan't have time, dear," said I. There was no doubt about that!

I thought somehow she seemed relieved. She certainly kissed me warmly then, for the first time that morning.

"Good-bye then, dear," said she. "Don't forget me."

"As if I could!" I protested, with some warmth, which I think was genuine enough.

As I held her to me and thought of the hazards to which I was going it seemed hard upon her to leave her with no inkling of my intention. But secrecy was essential. I caught my breath, and kissed her.

"Good-bye, my darling," said I. Then I left the house and made for the manor of Soleby.

## CHAPTER V

### LAST REPARATIONS

IT was not quite twelve when I turned in the drive which led through the home-wood to the manor-house. The sombre sky of the night and early morning had cleared, and the sun, not its height, shone warm and cheerful, fig a dancing filigree of golden lacework in the gravel of the drive through the stand brown of the leaves which still hurt their splendid decay on the trees which lined the road. For some reason or other I had more at home on the land of my father than I had done since I found it necessary to sell the manor. Could it be that there was a chance of recovering the estate? No longer a question of money. There was enough wealth in that hidden recess to have the hall and lands four or five over. But would the Frenchmen and Duke had hinted that by loyal seignior regain the estate. God knew if bribe were needed to make me could have been enough!

A footman somewhat too brilliant for English seemed to own the door which still at once jary, the very room in

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So I told them all that I had done and gave them a short sketch of the natures of old Joe and his sons.

"You could not have done better," cried the Count. "But where do you think of landing?"

"I thought of going round into the bay, somewhere near the mouth of the Loire," said I. "But possibly you have later intelligence and other plans. I have found the boat, and place myself in your hands."

"You've done everything!" cried the Duke, waving his arms in Gallic enthusiasm. "'Pon my word if I could have laid my hand on a craft of the kind I think I should have ventured myself."

For some incomprehensible reason or other I was seized with the hope that he would not so venture but would leave the matter to me—to me and Miss Dumergue. Why should he interfere in our galley?

"You could not," said the Count tersely. "But tell our friend upon what he can rely when once he has landed."

Again the Duke made a windmill of his arms. "My dear friend," said he. "We have plenty of friends on French soil still, though they are in the minority and have to keep quiet. I can give you messages to a hundred people between Belle Isle and Metz who will treat you as a brother. They will supply you with horses and afford you every assistance which it may be safe for them to give or for you to receive. I have already

prepared a map of France, on a scale sufficiently large to enable me to indicate to you where you should seek our friends. Carry it on you, but in the event of your being in imminent peril of capture by any one likely to be inimical to your project you must destroy the map and trust to your memory."

I was blessed with an exceptionally good memory.

"I'll memorize it during the passage over," said I.

"My dear friend," cried the Duke, who was as gushing this morning as he had been stern and reticent for the first few minutes of our encounter overnight.

There was the sound of a light laugh, and of an opening door. I turned and saw Sylvia Dumergue advancing into the room, accompanied by a clean-shaven man whom close inspection betrayed to be nearer fifty than forty, but who carried himself and dressed like a young buck of five and twenty. His hair showed no sign of grey, his skin was smooth and of good colour. His six feet of height was held erect, his slim figure was lithe, and he stepped as lightly as a boy. His eyes were grey, and in moments of repose were very hard. But when he was animated they lit up with a brilliancy which was nevertheless a hard brilliancy, and, like the humour which came from his thin lipped, white toothed mouth, gave a sardonic rather than a kindly impression. His features were classic and regular. Perhaps his nose was a little too pro-

nounced, a little too forcible, for Greek correctness. But the whole effect of the man was one of youthful power and conscious beauty. It was only when he smiled ironically that the crows' feet round his eyes suddenly twisted his face into that of a relentless old man. Despite the thinness of his lips there was a look of passion about him which, coupled with his determination, suggested that he would not be readily thwarted in gratifying a fancy. Not a woman could have looked in his eyes without knowing him for an admirer of the least admirable qualities of her sex.

I was about to greet the lady when I caught a warning glance from the Count. Ah! Of course! I should have known that I was a stranger to her in the eyes of her father. The Count's eyes flashed approval of my comprehension.

"Back again then!" cried the Duke. "Let me introduce you to Mr. Fisher, the former owner of this property. Miss Dumergue, Mr. Fisher; Mr. Dumergue, Mr. Fisher."

I gave and received the usual commonplace bows of courtesy.

"Oh, Mr. Fisher!" cried the lady (and I could have sworn there was a dancing mischief in her eyes), "how could you bear to sell this lovely old place! I'd never have parted with it if I'd been in your place!"

"Ahum!" said her father. "Sylvia, my dear, you forget that there are many reasons why Mr. Fisher may have wished to part with the property. Ahum! It is hardly a deli-

cate thing to put to him. Ahum ! Very nice place, though," he added patronizingly. "Shouldn't mind picking up such a place for myself. Do you find it suits you, Duke ?" he asked.

I noticed that his French, when he used it, was as good as his daughter's. But though the name was French the family had been settled in England since the great influx of the Huguenots at the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. Nantes, begad ! I thought, when I heard the Duke mention this at the luncheon table, that there seemed to be a good lot of Nantes about our business.

I was impatient to get through with lunch. We could not discuss ways and means of our venture in the presence of the millionaire. I learnt, however, that he was going to Warncliffe Decoy in the afternoon for a wild fowl shoot, and would not be back that night. It seemed that there was an old governess or housekeeper at the manor who chaperoned Sylvia in her father's absence, but that she did not put in an appearance in public. When he was away Sylvia passed her time with her—or was supposed to do so. As a matter of fact she was generally plotting on behalf of France and the Empress with the two Imperialist nobles.

The one thing that concerned me was that the millionaire would not be on the spot that night to interfere with our arrangements.

After the millionaire had driven off we four conspirators held a council in the library. The Duke gave me the map which he had pre-

pared, and of which he had spoken, and also wrote a score or so specimens of his signature which I was to use as vouchers for anything I might require of his friends in France. He briefly recapitulated the latest intelligence he had received from the Imperialist spies with whom he was in communication, as to the movements of troops, both French and German, the places where we were most like to meet with danger from the Republican government or from the Prussians, and the best route for us to take when once we were landed. He strongly advised a landing near the mouth of the Loire as I had suggested and gave us the names of the Imperialist proprietors of a château which stood almost on the coast, a little to the south of Le Croisic, to the north of the Loire. Here the Marquis de Belle Isle and his wife did their best to mute the sounds of war and internal strife which came to them from the east, and here, at any rate for the present, there was no danger from either Prussians or Gambetta.

Before I left the manor I took five hundred pounds in gold from the hidden recess and asked the Duke if he could let me have French money, notes or scrip of some kind, which would not be so cumbersome to carry about. He laughed at me and declined to allow me to take a farthing from the hoard for the expenses of the venture. "My good sir," said he, "our millionaire has reasons of his own for forwarding our cause, though he's too mean to find cash for the bribery of Bazaine. He



does not know anything of the proposed scheme. But I can let you have a thousand pounds sterling in notes on the Bank of France. Shut your gold up again."

But I insisted on taking two hundred at any rate, the amount I had promised old Joe. This, with fifty in my pocket and the Frenchmen's thousand, would, I thought, be enough to see us through to success or failure.

Sylvia had been very silent and reserved during the interview. But just as I was going to start for my inn to pack a few things in a small bag which I thought might be useful, I saw her face brighten and her lips gradually expand into a broad smile. I followed the direction of her eyes through the window and, to my horror, saw the Rev. Percy Ramsbotham and Maggie advancing determinedly towards the approach to the front door.

I could not help feeling vexed and annoyed.

I waited till I heard the bell, then I said, "I think I'll go out through the gun-room if you don't mind."

As I spoke the gorgeous footman brought in the parson's and his daughter's cards.

"Oh, of course the Duke must see them," cried Sylvia gaily. "Show them into the small drawing-room."

"But why?" cried the Duke, astounded.

"They are friends of Mr. Fisher's," said Sylvia wickedly. "And you know father always likes to talk with country clergymen."

He says they teach him so much concerning the conditions of the nation?"

She laughed mischievously, and, I thought, felt mischievous.

"Go how you please, my friend," said the Duke to me, seeing that I was anxious to get off. "And you will return to fetch our heroine after dusk? Eh?"

"Yes," said I. "A little after seven. Please have everything you will need ready," I said to Sylvia, a little curtly, for I was vexed that she should make game of me, as I felt sure she was doing. "We sail before eight."

She still laughed. "Good-bye for the present," said she. "Come, Duke. Come and see the village *cuvé*, and make him promise to call again to meet father. I must not see him or he will wonder where I am gone to when to calls again, and it would never do for him or for his daughter to hear that I have gone with Mr. Fisher."

The Duke rose with a sigh, and threw away his eternal cigarette. "Well," said he, "our family were always upholders of the church. And so were yours begad, d'Arthenay. Come on."

He playfully seized the younger man and led him off in the direction of the small drawing-room.

"Wouldn't you like to go and see—her?" asked Sylvia, looking at me. "You may if you like. There's plenty of time."

For a moment I felt impelled to rush and seize her and give her a good shaking. Why

did she behave like a naughty, teasing child ? Yet did she ? Why should she not suggest that I might like to see my betrothed ? And why should I resent the suggestion when it came from her ? If any one else had hinted that I might wish to see Maggie, surely I should have considered it as the most natural thing in the world.

"No," I said, "I shouldn't. Now if you'll excuse me I'll make my way into the ride through the woods by means of the gun-room door."

"How cross you are !" said she, pouting deliciously.

I turned round with a dash. But she was already gone, and I caught sight of her, waving me back with her lissome hands, as she fled along the corridor in the direction opposite to that I must take to reach the gun-room.

"Well," I thought to myself, as I made my way towards the inn, for the last time before sailing. "If she's going to tease me like that while we are on our venture, I've let myself in for a nice thing."

I tried, in vain, to reason out why I should regard what might be mere consideration for my feelings as tantalizing caprice. Why should my heart kick and throb at this girl's words ?

At the moment I imagined the scene in the small drawing-room at the manor-house. The Duke and the Count, courteously endeavouring to understand the vapouring of the parson, and the parson patting himself on the

back at the reception he had found. And Maggie—Maggie the girl whom I was to marry? What figure did she make in the tableau?

Somehow it was not on her country wholesomeness that my mind grew concentrated. The face which forced its way to my imagination was not pink and white, but of richer, deeper tint; the eyes were not blue, but dark; the hair was not golden, but black; and (alas! I must confess it) the manner was not commonplace, but superbly attractive, fascinating, magnetic.

Why did the girl I loved (of course I loved her) make so poor a show in my fancies in comparison with the teasing—no, not that—with the strange grace of the girl I had seen but twice?

Would the next fortnight or three weeks solve the problem—or did I know the solution already?

## CHAPTER VI

### THE ANCHOR'S WEIGHED

“**A**H, my friend!” cried the Duke, when I returned to the manor-house about ten minutes before seven in the evening. “Your country curé! But he is *impayable*! He called me ‘Grace’ and the Count ‘mylor’ till he give us ze headache! Yes? But ze fille du curé? Pas mauvaise? Eh? A leetle quite! Not chic. No, no. But charming! Oh yes! Charming! But why zey no name you? I sought you were fiancé of ze lady’s! Non? Zey not name you not at all, but zey ask moch of M. Dumergue, ‘ze famoos meellionaire’ zey call him! Oh! Vot a people! Are all ze curés and zeir daughters—are zey all like zat?”

A ringing laugh came from Sylvia. We were again in the library, and the girl was muffled up in warm rough clothing, a fur cap showing off her winning features to the most fascinating advantage.

“You see, Mr. Fisher,” she cried. “The Duke does not approve of your taste! And vy, oh vy”—the witch mockingly imitated the Duke’s English which I have for once reproduced—“vy, oh vy did zey not name your name, M. Feesher?”

“Oh, it’s all very funny, no doubt,” said I,

in a temper. "But if we are to succeed in this affair we must treat it with some seriousness. It is time for us to get away aboard the boat."

"Oh, you *are* cross!" cried Sylvia. "And if I laugh at any mortal thing, 'tis that I may not weep," she added, in a low-pitched voice, which I believe reached no other ears but mine.

Her eyes were really scintillating with moisture, though I have my doubts to this day if it was really the effect of tears. Whatever it was it was enough for me.

"Oh, you know I don't mean to be," I murmured. "But we must be away. Are you all ready?"

"But have you no carriage, my friend?" asked the Duke.

"Not I," I answered. "It's only a quarter of an hour's walk and a carriage would give us away. There is a ferry to cross, where I've taken my bag already, and I suppose Miss Dumergue has not packed any huge dress baskets. But one question before we're off. Am I to know where to find the Empress's jewels?"

"No," said the Duke. "That is why Miss Dumergue is going with you. Were it our own affair you may be sure we would tell you everything. But it is the Empress's, and Miss Dumergue is pledged to tell no one the exact spot. Neither I nor the Count know it."

"Oh, all right," said I. Then I turned to the girl: "Are you ready?" I asked. "Where are your things?"

She held out a bag which was surprisingly reasonable for a woman about to start on a journey which might last a month.

"Yes," she said, and her voice was more subdued, and softer than it had been before.

"Shall we go any of the way with you?" asked the Duke. But I made up my mind that I and Sylvia would have the walk to the ferry and the place where the boat was waiting on the beach to ourselves. The sooner we became on intimate terms the better. We could not remain strangers if we were to be together, and practically alone, for a fortnight or more.

"No, thank you," said I.

So we said good-bye then and there, and left the Frenchmen toasting us and our enterprise in some more of the magnificent Bordeaux which I had tasted at first hearing of the hazard.

I carried Sylvia's baggage in my right hand, and she walked on my left. The night was dark, for the moon was young and was already down. But away, over the top of the trees to which we were wending, the Bear kicked with its hind legs at the Pole star, and to the north lay the ferry over the Blyth and the village of Walberswick. As we neared the woods I bent to the right—for I had decided to take the narrow ride, instead of the drive, and so escape the notice of the people at the lodge. It would (as Sylvia had suggested) never do if it were to be rumoured that she and I had eloped. The threat of the mystery of woodland in the

dark cast its shadow on the girl. She drew close to me, and when I offered my left arm and a suggestive crook at the elbow, she took it, and I could feel her pressing to my side. "I'm not afraid of the dark, really," she murmured. "But I thought that all the spirits of the woods must hate me and all of us who have taken your heritage from you, and I felt that I must come close to you for protection!"

My heart swelled up. How pretty was her thought! How delicate and graceful her reference to my loss. God bless her! Whatever happened to us on our venture I would be her true servant till it was over. Surely I could do that without infidelity to Maggie! This was a mere political gamble—not connected with love in any way!

She held my arm as we passed beneath the shelter of the spreading branches. I could have found my way with my eyes shut, and it was fortunate that I could, for in places where the firs had not been trimmed for years there was but little light which filtered through. It was a strange situation for me, to be alone with this lovely and attractive girl in the dark woods, after fall of night, and to feel that she trusted me enough to have no fear. The thought of her trust buoyed up my courage and my powers of resistance. But why did the arm she held tremble?

The ride took us out on to a meadow through the middle of which a footpath led straight to the Walberswick ferry. I purposely avoided the path which would have taken us through



the village, for there would be high jinks in the Walberswick inns that night, after a successful run the night before, and high jinks are incompatible with a secret embarkation.

We could hear the songs of the merry-makers as we passed alongside the river to the ferry where one-armed Sam was waiting for me.

"Here ye be, maaster," said he. "I ha' been a waitin' for yew an' yar lad!"

I started. For the first time I noticed that Sylvia had clothed herself in a long ulster, and that this together with her head-gear gave her the look of a very handsome boy. Her hair was all tucked up under her cap, her ulster exposed stout masculine boots. Her figure was disguised, and no one could have guessed without a closer inspection than one-armed Sam could make that it was a girl, and a beautiful girl who was with me. She saw that I had, at last, observed her disguise, and her eyes lit up with laughter. I must say here, that throughout all our dangers and hardships the blessed gift of innocent merriment never left her, and by means of her cheerfulness she did much to keep my heart light and constant in endeavour.

I slung the baggage aboard the pontoon-like ferry-boat, and helped Sylvia on to its rugged framework.

"Yar things lay for'ard theer, maaster," said Sam. "Be any one a comin' ta help ye carry 'em, or shall I come along o' ye?"

I had made no arrangements with old Joe to meet me, but I thought it likely that he

or one of his sons would not be far off the landing staithe on the Southwold side. I had left it to old Joe to explain to Sam, and I learnt afterwards that he had informed him that we were bent on running the blockade of Havre which the French were keeping up—a fleet blockading its own ports! Was ever anything so absurd!—in order to prevent munitions of any kind being landed which the enemy might seize. Several Lowestoft and Yarmouth boats had found it worth their while to run the blockade with cargoes of herring, and the explanation offered the ferryman was feasible and probable. As it was in the nature of smuggling he thoroughly approved of it, and would have bitten his tongue out rather than betray any detail concerning what he knew, or thought he knew.

As soon as the boat went grinding and groaning against the landing-stage I heard a low call from the dim gloom which stretched over the denes. I recognized Doubler's voice, and softly whistled the tune of "The cobbler and the sailor's wife," devoutly hoping that no servant's indiscretion had informed Sylvia of the words of that preposterous song.

"Be that yew, Maaster Hinnery?" asked Doubler, in a husky sea voice, as he loomed his vast bulk through the mist that the October night was drawing up from the river.

"Oh, Mr. Fisher," cried Sylvia, whispering in my ear. "You won't lose me, will you?"

Lose her?

But was she in earnest? I fancied I heard

a tremble of mirth in her voice. And, indeed, in times of stress I never saw her other than full of cool and steady courage.

"Come yew on," said Doubler. "Wheer's yar traps? Is this yar mate?"

I gave him the whole of the luggage. It was nothing to him. And I contented myself with seeing to Sylvia's footsteps.

"Good-night an' goo' luck tee ye, maaster," said one-armed Sam, as he spat on the coins I had given him. "If anybody ax, I hain't seed narthen on ye. He! he! he. Good-night tee ye."

I heard the chain rattle and the crank scream as he began to wind the old boat on her backward path.

"Dee yew foller me, bor," said Doubler. "That fare that thick ta-night yew might lewse yarsel on the denes."

I reassured him, and he started off at a good pace over the hillocks of marum and smooth stretches of sand. In the direction which he took we could hear the rushing beats of a swell on the beach. But the wind was "off" from the nor'-west, and though this brought up a swell and high tide, it caused no broken water inshore. A good wind for us, and by the sound and smell of it I thought it would freshen. The sun had gone down red, with black bars of cloud about it. Well, a brisk nor'-wester would suit us very well.

The noise of the breakers grew louder as we trod our silent way to the beach. We had emerged from the bed of mist from the

river, and I could see the darkness of the North Sea, and feel the shingle of the beach beneath my feet.

I looked out to sea, but could not distinguish the lights of the *Kittiwake*. There were several red port lights moving to the nor'ard, and out to sea I fancied I could distinguish a number of white head-lights, as though the drifters were at work. But if so they must be only longshore boats. The dandies would not fish so far to the south.

"Are ye all ready aboard?" I asked Doubler, as he slacked his pace to come alongside of us now that it was no longer necessary for him to show the way.

"Ah!" said he. "But we're oony a takin' faa'er, Rumbo, Dory an' me. We're lavin' the booy behind 'cos o' his tongue. Oh! An' if we make a shot yew'll ha'e ta lend a hand, yew an' yar mate."

He evidently took Sylvia for a boy, and, after a moment's consideration I determined not to undeceive him for the present.

"Here we be," said he, as we came to a standstill beside a beach boat, which lay stern on, its bows washed by the breakers. Rumbo was there, waiting for us, and as soon as the luggage was thrown in the boat and we were seated, the two fishermen seized the stern and with a mighty heave ran her out. Rumbo came tumbling in over the stern in the space which I had seen was left for him, and began to push off with the oars. Then Doubler gave one more heave, coming in the

sea over the knees of his thigh boots, and, in his turn, leapt in.

Each brother took an oar, I thrust the steering oar overboard, and we were off.

I saw a light flashed twice a little way out to sea as soon as the sound of the oars thrummed out in the night. I wondered if we had been noticed by any coastguard. But the coastguard's night walk along the beach was so regular in its times that I knew old Joe would not have fixed an hour when there was any risk of running athwart their hawse.

In a very little time I swerved the boat's head to meet the flood, coming from the north, and we brought up alongside the *Kittiwake*. She swung with her sides above us, and I wondered for a moment how Sylvia would get aboard. But when she saw Rumbo pass the boat forward to the bows and climb up from the bobstay to the bowsprit and so to the foredeck, she was up as quickly, ay and quicker too! You may be sure I was not long after her, and within five minutes of our reaching the dandy we had our boat on deck, mains'l and fores'l up, and were under way. Presently with a "yeo heave yo" the mizzen rose, then the jib. "We shan't want no tawps'ls outside," grunted old Joe. "Hare, Rumbo, dee yew take har while I hev a mardle along o' our maaster an' his mate."

We had been standing to windward, out of the way of the booms, but now that we were fairly off I led Sylvia astern towards the old man, who now, for the first time that night,

took his attention from the *Kittiwake* sufficiently to enable him to welcome us. Our side and head lights gave no illumination on deck, and the binnacle light only showed the compass. Old Joe grasped each of us by the hand (and I feared for Sylvia's tender fingers in that horny clasp). "Hare we be, right an' tight. Now, maaster, what course shall us set when we git outside? When yew ha' sattled that us'll goo down to the cuddy a' hev a drop o' someat for luck."

"We're bound for the Bay, as I told you," said I. "Keep well out from the French coast till you are past Ushant, and I think it would be as well to try to get as far down channel as we can before morning."

"We ha' got the very blow us want," said Joe. "An' tha'ss good luck. Yew ha' allust brote us luck afore, noo doubt yew ha' fetched it aboard ta-night. As for Ushant, we bain't nigh that yit, nor shan't be. Rumbo," he cried, "south-east by east till ye bring the pier light dead astarn. Then due south till I tall ye. Now, Maaster Hinnery, down yew an' yar mate come. Yew'll escuse us, young maaster," said he to Sylvia, "but yew'll find us rough an' riddy. Maaster Hinnery he know how ta taake us, bein' brote up one on us as I might say. But yew doan't want ta be afeared if we fare a bit rough. Yew'll find us true!"

"I'm sure of it," said Sylvia heartily (and I felt her press my arm).

At the sound of her voice old Joe gave me

a look and a wink. But he stopped the words on his lips, and, with a significant grin on his fine rugged countenance, he gave way to me as I handed Sylvia to the coaming of the stern hatchway.

I felt the *Kittiwake* sheer as Rumbo got her into her course. Then I cried, "But what about the herring? Were we not to get a few crans if we could as an excuse for being on the other side?"

"Tha'ss as yew like," said old Joe. "Oan't that fare ruther dutty wark for—for yar mate?"

"Oh, I don't mind!" cried Sylvia.

"We must not mind that," said I, for I thought it a matter of importance to have something to show if we were overhauled by any inquisitive craft that had a right to demand investigation.

"Well theer may be enow south o' Lowes-toft," said old Joe. "We'll try it anyways. Rumbo, bor, nor'-east till I tall ye or till ye smell harrin'. We're a gooin' ta try arter a cran or tew afore gooin' fudder."

The old man had brought his sons up to unquestioning obedience—it was before the days of the board schools! "No'-no'-east it is," said Rumbo.

Again the *Kittiwake* sheered till we found the lights of Walberswick, now on our port quarter.

"Keep har at that till we shute," said the old man. "Now come on dew an' le'ss hev a hearin' down below."

So down we all three went, down the narrow companion to the stuffy reek of the little cuddy. We were fairly off.



## CHAPTER VII

### SOUTH BY WEST

**G**LOOMY as the murk of oily smoke kept the little cabin, with its one dingy hanging paraffin lamp swinging over the bare deal table which occupied the centre of the space, the light was better than on deck, and, for the first time since I had realized that it was possible for my companion to be taken for a boy I could distinguish her sufficiently clearly to be sure that she had not been so romantically commonplace or so vulgarly romantic as to garb herself in masculine attire because she was engaged on a venture of "derring do." Her long ulster covered her skirts. I could see by the fall of it that those stout little boots projected beneath feminine folds and not bifurcal cylinders. And I was glad to find it so, for somehow I was old-fashioned enough to feel displeasure at seeing a woman for whom I felt respect masquerading like a wench in comic opera or Napoleonic fiction.

Old Joe gave a glance at her. "I thote so when I heerd ye speak, miss," said he. "And yew're in the right a dressin' so warm an' sensible for a vy'ge. Well. Here ye see yar quarters. Me an' my sons can dew on



deck or in the fore peak along o' the spare canwas well enow. Theer's tew good berths, one o' each side, an' a planty o' rugs an' what not. Soo lay yew down wheniver yew fare ta want. Make yarselves at hoam, an' remember as what doan't consarn me bain't my business."

I thought poor Sylvia looked a little askance at our lodging. Indeed, though the bunks were broad and would have been comfortable sleeping quarters for two, if not four, men, yet the circumstances were of a rather delicate nature, and at that stage of our venture we could not reconcile ourselves to them without some sense of discomfort. At a later stage, when we were used to being alone together, we might have thought little of lying down side by side and taking the rest we needed. Perfect trust casteth out fear. And our adventure was to bring us that mutual boon whatever else it brought us.

But it was evident that old Joe had done his best. After all I could take a watch on deck well enough while Sylvia was sleeping below, and for the matter of that, I could coil myself up in the eyes of the dandy on the spare sails as well as any seasoned fisherman of them all.

"This must be my mate's quarters," said I. "And it will do well enough, Joe. Won't it, Miss Du——, oh! I really can't go on calling you by your name in full while we are embarked on this adventure. What shall I call you?"

I saw her teeth gleam as she laughed. She was certainly very charming when she smiled. Old Joe's eyes were fixed upon her, and I knew I should hear some outspoken appraisal of her beauty when I followed him on deck.

"Call me 'mate,'" said she.

"I will," I cried, much taken with the idea. "Well then, mate, can you make yourself comfortable here?"

"Yes, thank you, Har—er—er, Captain," cried she, laughing with lips and eyes all together.

"Captain won't do," said I. "It will be too suspicious when we get ashore in France. You'd better call me by my Christian name as you were about to do. That is, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind, Harry," said she, quite frankly and easily. "But what would Miss Ramsbotham say?"

I pretended not to hear her, but she laughed more openly than ever. She seemed to delight in teasing me. And perhaps I bore her teasing with equanimity.

I thought it a good opportunity to hand over to old Joe the money I had promised him. I knew I could trust the old man to be at the rendezvous to take us aboard again at whatever date I might appoint, so it was better to pay him the full £200 at once. "Here's your brass, Joe," said I, laying the two chinking bags on the table. I had slipped these into the great game pockets of the

shooting coat which I wore, and I believe the old man had been puzzling his head to think where I had stowed the promised fee. "You'll find two hundred sovereigns there."

Old Joe's hands comfortably embraced the plump bags, and seemed to absorb them. "Wha yew din't want ta dew that, Maaster Hinnery," said he, endeavouring to look hurt, but in reality at peace with all the world, and overjoyed at the feel of the gold. "That 'ud ha' done when us fetched ye back agin. But ha'e ye left yarself enow, bor?"

I reassured him on that point, and began to push him up the companion. "Is there anything you wish for, mate?" I asked. "Anything we can get for you before you turn in for the night?"

I thought her face looked a little blank as I prepared to leave her. "No," she answered. "But you need not go immediately. Need you? I shan't turn in as you call it, for hours yet. I'm too excited. I want to see how the little craft sails and what it looks like to be out on the sea at night in a small fishing boat" (for to her the stout thirty-five ton boat seemed but a tiny refuge from the ocean). "Mayn't I go on deck with you for a little? Why, it's not nine o'clock yet!"

I was delighted to learn that she did not wish to part from me so soon. "Of course you may," said I, "if you can put up with the slippery and fishy decks."

"Well," said she. "I'll unpack one or two things first and then I'll follow you up."

Old Joe, who was still loitering on the lowest stair of the companion, began to struggle with something in his breeches' pocket. At length he hauled out a prodigious whistle, and held it out to Sylvia. "Hare ye be, miss," said he, "or p'raps I should say Mam—No? Wery well. Miss then. Hare ye be. Take yew this an' when we want anybardy or anything dee yew blow intew it."

She was about to refuse the proffered call, but I thought the idea a good one and gave her a look which she understood. "Thank you, said she. "I shall feel like the queen of a magic whistle."

So we left her, and went on deck.

"D'ye know what, Maaster Hinnery?" asked old Joe. "I rackon she's a bewty. I doan't fare ta recollect a seein' a prattier wench since—well, I doan't believe as *iver* I did! But is this hare brass right? Dee yew mane me ta taake it an' kape it now?"

I made him easy on this head, and the old boy went off somewhere for'ard to stow away his treasure.

Rumbo was at the tiller, Doubler stood by the horse on which the mainsheet block rode, and Dory was in the bows, sitting on a net bouy, smoking.

The *Kittiwake* had now made an offing of five or six miles, and we were well into the North Sea outside the roads. The wind had freshened and had drawn off two points, being now almost due north, the wind above all others for the herring. The strong blow sent

up a good bobble of a sea, and, with the flood under it, the swell was considerable, so that although the dandy rode like a duck the power of her canvas drove her nose into the leap of the billows every now and then and sent a glowing sheet of phosphorescence glinting over our bows. The sky had cleared, and the swinging Bear, still kicking at the Pole star with its hind legs, was seawards; the North Star itself we carried fair on our port bow. To starboard the regular moving white, red and green lights warned us of steamers. Astern the lights of Walberswick were now almost too insignificant to be seen. Often, where the summit of the rolling waves curved to a breaking crest, the light of phosphorescence shimmered with an eerie and beautiful effect. Far off, on our port bow, a forest of lights twinkled, but these were distant, and only rendered visible by their number. It was the herring fleet.

I was leaning against the coaming of the main hatchway, drinking in the charm of the sea and the night, and exulting in every leap of the gallant dandy, and in every shock wherewith she dashed the brine from her bows in scintillating spindrift, when I felt a hand laid lightly on my arm, and I sensed that exquisite subtle perfume which is one of the strongest personal charms of a fascinating woman.

"Isn't it lovely?" whispered a voice in my ear. "Would it not be delightful if it could all be like this? Ah! How the salt

spray makes one's cheeks glow and burn !  
How glorious ! How glorious ! ”

A feeling of intense intimacy with this fair girl came upon me. It seemed to me, standing there on the heaving deck, with the song of the wind in the rigging and of the passage of the lines of our graceful hull through the billows, the shrill pizzicato of the taut weather shrouds, and the long-drawn note of the surge at the cutwater, that there was a closer bond between us two than there could ever be, in the case of either of us, with any one else. Though Sylvia's hand lay in the hollow of my elbow I felt it pressing on my heart. I murmured to myself that I would be a brother to her !

We had passed the long-shore herring boats while I was below, and were now almost level with a number of lights which were thronged together to the nor'ard.

Old Joe had returned. “ The feesh are a layin' in cloose ta-night,” said he. “ I rackon there's weather a comin'. But Maaster Hinnery, if so be as yew think us ought ta hev a few crans o' harrin' aboard in case we git overhauled how'd it dew ta shoot now ? The feesh'll come south now an' again when the fear o' weather drive 'em inshoor.”

Now it seemed to me that it would be preferable to be taken for blockade runners of so harmless a cargo as herring than for what we were, if we had the ill fortune to be brought to by a French government vessel. On the other hand we had not half a crew for hand-

ling the nets, and herring fishing is a dirty business. I did not think that the smell and "slushiness" attached to it would be welcome to Sylvia. But I remembered that I had heard that local boats had already run the blockade of both Havre and Cherbourg, so that it would not create any surprise among the herring fleet if we bought a few crans from some other drifter. We should then get our exculpatory cargo without the trouble and loss of time which shooting our own nets would involve. And just then I caught sight of a dandy rigged craft with her mainmast lowered, drifting with her nets out, only a fraction of a point to the nor'ard of our course.

"That would mean a night's fishing, Joe," said I in answer to the old fellow, "and we're short of hands for drawing a decent shot. Let's hail that boat on our port bow and ask if they've hauled yet. If they have we might buy enough for our purpose."

Old Joe and his sons readily agreed. They had their pouches full of brass and were not disposed for the hard and dirty work of herring catching. They had not got their thigh boots on, and they knew in what a state a net of fish would make them. Besides, in those days there were no donkey engines aboard to help the draft of fishes, and the full complement of a dandy drifter was at least ten men.

Rumbo altered our course so that we might approach the stranger without fouling their



shoot of nets, which streamed away for near two miles inshore of the drifter.

"Ha'e ye hauled yit?" shouted the old man. Then, with a look at the scud to windward, which was drifting in huge rolling masses of sepia cloud over the stars of a sheer and lofty sky, he said to me, "I darsen't risk it, maaster. There'll be such a blow afore we could git the feesh aboard as'll take us all our time ta weather. Lor! Look ar it a comin'. D'ye hare it?" I did, and at once I begged Sylvia to go below. The girl was as sensible as courageous, and she disappeared down the companion without a word further than to exact a promise from me to let her know if there were danger.

The reply from the other boat came cheerily at the beginning of it. "Ah! An' got a nice lot. Four last at the first haul I reckon."

But even as the hearty voice came over the sea the roar of the wind grew louder, and, as some one aboard the drifting fishing boat yelled, "Stand by with the gear," and there came a sound of clumsy trampling about the wet decks of the stranger, a line of white foam leapt at us out of the obscurity of the sea to windward. "Luff! Luff!" cried old Joe, and Rumbo had the helm hard down to shoot the *Kittiwake* into the eye of the wind in time to prevent the weight of the gust catching the flat of our canvas.

In an instant old Joe and all three of his sons were hard at it. Without any clamour of orders the tops'l came down with a run, and



the jib came home. The bowsprit was brought home and made fast, the main and mizzens'ls reefed. It was no time for sea courtesies, so without farewell, as soon as we were snug and cosy aloft and below, Rumbo let her fill and draw round till we headed sheer to the south.

Then, and not till then, did old Joe look with sympathetic interest at the fishing boat which by this time was only visible by her lights astern of us.

"If that hold they'll ha'e ta cut away, and lose their gear," said he. "Lor! Lor! A sight o' things a pore feeshin' chap ha' ta put up wi? A sight o' things."

A curling roller came roaring up behind, and burst over our counter so that the decks were knee deep in water till the open scuppers eased us. Fortunately the companion hatch was closed and the well battened down.

Old Joe spoke a word or two with Rumbo, and then the spinnaker boom was run out to starboard, and the triangular sail rose and bellied. I could feel it lift us, and we now ran faster than the waves, so that there was no fear of another curler coming in over our stern.

"Tha'ss a rum un," said old Joe. "Tain't far short of a double gale, and if this hold, blarm my ole heart alive, us uns ull see the p'int o' Ushant inside o' t'ree days."

The sea had not yet felt the full effects of the gale, but it was rising steadily, and soon the *Kittiwake* began to leap and stagger along in a way which would have been disconcerting

to any one who did not know the superb sea going qualities of the east coast herring craft. These boats are built for weathering the October and November gales, and will go out to sea-gaily enough when the Scotch luggers dare not put their noses outside harbour. But would Sylvia feel the same confidence as my experience enabled me to feel ?

Now that we were running, with spinnaker out there was nothing much to watch on deck. Rumbo kept her steady on her course, and all of us crowded astern to keep her bows up as much as possible. We might run without drawing or easing a sheet, or shifting our course half a point, till we were off the North Foreland, for we were well enough out to head straight for the entrance to the Channel, hurtling over the fling of the leaping rollers with the wind dead on our starboard quarter, wet sheets to port, a following wind and sea, a good boat, everything taut and cosy. Despite the weight of wind there was no danger while the gale held steady where it was, and we could keep a fixed course. I made up my mind to go below to reassure Sylvia.

"How's her head?" I asked Rumbo, as I glanced at the binnacle.

"Sou by west," said he.

Our voyage to the Bay of Biscay had begun in earnest, and we were being sped upon our course by a wind that screamed encouragement to us as it rushed us along in a symphony of the gamuts of storm.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A BLOWY NIGHT

OF all the erratic motions of a sailing boat in a breeze the most trying for the inexperienced is that of a following sea and wind when the swell is considerable. The long heave, the sinking of the deck planks beneath the feet as the stern falls in the trough of two seas, the buoyant sense of helplessness as the craft is caught and carried on a hillock of rolling water, has caused more seasickness than any short chopping head-to-wind work. I wondered how Sylvia was feeling as I passed down the hatchway and descended the companion stairs. But I need have been under no apprehension. She was seated at the deal table in the middle of the cuddy, her thick ulster had been removed—for it was almost too warm “below,” with the glowing fire of coal and coke which the mighty draught of the gale above was drawing fiercely up the iron stove pipe which vomited its smoke to the night air abaft the mainmast. All the grace of her figure was displayed in a short skirted blue serge costume, with white piping to give it a lightness. She looked up at me brightly as I stumbled down the bottom stair, giving to the roll of the boat.

“You don’t seem to be much affected by the tossing you’re getting,” said I.

"Oh! I'm an old sailor," she replied, "but, as a matter of fact, I've never been seasick in my life. I like the dance and dash of it. The only thing I don't like is a heavy, oily ground swell in a calm. That is dull and monotonous, ugh! And—and *greasy*. But even that doesn't make me ill. As for this—why! I suppose it's the very thing we want. Isn't it?"

She looked very graceful and enticing as she sat there, so neat and attractive, in the dingy cuddy. What a change it was to me to pass from the dark rush of the storm on deck to the quiet of this little overheated cabin! Though we could feel the leaping strokes of the *Kittiwake* as she smote through wave after wave, and though the floor boards of the cuddy were at an angle of 45° with the horizontal, the strife and energy of the night on deck was hushed here, below.

I looked at Sylvia and found that it would be better for my own sake if I did not remain too long under the charm of her presence. I was but mortal, and I was the promised husband of Maggie Ramsbotham.

"If you'd like to turn in now," said I, smoothing a number of rugs and sea blankets which lay on the lee bunk, "I'll take a watch on deck. If there's any danger of any kind I'll wake you. If you want anything you have the whistle."

Even as I spoke I had to catch at the port bulkhead over the berth, and a shock of furious water made the dandy tremble from cut-water to sternpost. What lee there was was on

the port side, but the roll of a following sea heaved us from port to starboard and from starboard to port with impartiality. I looked askance at the swaying bunks. "You'll never be able to keep in," said I, "unless you tie yourself in."

"Oh, I shall be all right," said Sylvia. "But you! Won't you be frozen on deck before morning? Won't you stay here below?"

I knew that she spoke out of the brave sense of purity which ever characterized her, and, under the conditions of life which must rule us till our mission was over, it seemed absurd to have any regard for the conventions. But I was not yet sufficiently innured to her companionship to accept her offer with the superb indifference with which it was made. I felt the trust she showed in me strengthen me to do such great things as might be in me (every young man is a potential hero at certain emotional moments of his life), but I must train myself to look on her as comrade pure and simple, and to forget that she was the most fascinating woman whom I had ever met, before I could take her confidence as a matter of course (the only possible way to make our association in adventure feasible), and I knew I should be able to do that better on deck, beyond the reach of her immediate charm, than below, in the glamour of her presence.

"Oh," I said, "it's delightful of you, mate, to ask me. But I'm sure you'll sleep better to-night if I'm on deck. You'll feel

more comfortable knowing that I'm on the look-out and will call you if anything makes it necessary."

"Well, don't tire yourself to death before we are really started," said she. "Good-night."

I went on deck, where I found the wind as strong as ever, and the sea beginning to get up. Old Joe was balancing himself on a cork fender, his eyes bright, his nostrils extended as he sniffed the power of the gale.

I had a pipe or two beside him, neither of us saying much, for the majesty of the rushing storm had laid the magic spell of tempest on both of us, and we sat, and rocked, and hearkened to the wash of the sea, the sish-sish-sish of the spindrift, and the incessant singing of the cordage, with as much enjoyment as a musician experiences in listening to a fine performance of Beethoven's ninth symphony—that wonderful assimilation of all that is terrible and beautiful in music.

The wind seemed steadier, and came less "gusty," but the sea was rising higher and higher. However, as yet, the *Kittiwake* made little enough of it, and hurried about her business like the tight little sea boat she was.

Old Joe turned to me with a yawn, as he knocked the ashes of his pipe into the foaming scuppers. "Why doan't ye turn in Maaster Hinnery?" said he. "If the weather hold us uns ull be nigh the Goodwins at day-break, and I'll wake ye then."

After all, I could do nothing on deck. The craft was in competent hands, and I had had no sleep the night before.

"You'll lay warm an' comferable enow in the forepeak," said old Joe.

"You'll wake me if anything happens unusual, or if there's anything which doesn't seem plain sailing," I said.

The old fellow turned his weatherbeaten face to windward. "That'll be all right," said he. "Tha'ss gooin' ta turn to one o' them dry norerly gales, an' yew can't ax moor 'an that for yar job. Git yew down, maaster, an' goo'-night tee ye."

I bade him and his sons good-night, lifted up the scuttle of the forepeak hatch, and dropped below. In less than five minutes I was sound asleep on the bed of spare canvas which lay in the eyes of the boat. The roar and dash of the bows, which seemed (and was, as far as that goes), right against my head, only served to act as a lullaby.

I did not wake till I was disturbed by the dim grey light of an angry dawn streaming through the forehatch as Dory made way into the forepeak with the spinnaker, which the boat could now hardly carry, rounding as she was to the south'ard.

"Stand by below there," cried Dory, stamping the sail through so that the body of it darkened the forepeak again. "Down she come."

With a last kick the drenched and dripping sail fell. I was at the hatchway in a moment, and had scrambled on deck in another. There was a good deal of tramping about as I emerged, and I saw Doubler taking a reef in the fores'l, while Dory ran aft again to help

Rumbo to get down the mizzen. Old Joe was at the tiller. Over to the east'ard, beneath the tossing, creaking boom of the mains'l, and across a long slate tumble (flecked with tossing heads of white) of as bad a short sea as ever I was out in, the rising sun was shooting cold white rays which fled along the raging undulations of the waters like some celestial searchlight. The wind had not lessened, nor shifted its quarter a fraction of a point, but as we drew near Thames mouth old Joe found that he had been standing a little too far to the east'ard, and had shifted our course so as to bring the breeze well on our starboard side, so that it was a case of in spinnaker, and draw sheets. As we rounded more and more to the west'ard and the gale caught us "full and by" driving into our canvas with full force, the mizzen became rather more than she could bear, and, with lowered mizzen, the fores'l was the better for a reef. These were the explanations which met me as I made my way aft.

Although we were far more on our beam than previously, the steady force of wind on our starboard quarter made the sailing a vast deal more comfortable than the terrific rolling had been when running. But we were now meeting the ebb, and when wind and tide meet there is a short leaping sea which makes a craft pitch and dive in a petulant expostulating manner which seems far more dangerous than it is. One could not walk the deck a yard without holding on, and all the air



we breathed was dank and impregnated with the evaporation of the brine, streaks of which came cold and shivery against my face at every pitch of the *Kittiwake*. But, by Jupiter! we were moving. Fast as the east coast drifters can "run" before the wind, they can sail with every sheet drawing, full and by with a reefing wind, nearly half as fast again. The spume and toss of the sea came half way up from the scuppers to the coaming, and the leech of our fores'l was wet half up the canvas. Even our main sometimes emerged from the swooping dive of a puff with water dripping from the boom. It was such a sail as I shall never forget. To talk of any yacht racing which ever I have known in comparison with that glorious rush through the Channel would seem to me to be all but impudence. Hardened as were the Thaxters to all the joys and wonders of the sea, I think they revelled in the race of the dancing little boat as much as I did. Usually they were busied about their fishing, thinking of the market, trying to outsail some other laden craft—in fact their minds were more on brass than on the mystery of the sea. But now they had but to make way as fast as possible. And they were doing it in such style as even I could hardly have credited.

As we passed the track of the outward bound vessels from the river we passed under the stern of more than one ocean giant, moving steadily along through the choppy sea as if gliding on rails ashore. From one

of these, a great East Indiaman, we received a hearty cheer, and we could hardly do less than cheer back.

Even as we did so we felt that we were past the influence of the tides of the North Sea, and that the ebb was now helping the wind to take us down channel.

The mighty liner ported her helm and swayed sedately to the west'ard, while we fussed and tossed in her wake.

Then I heard a whistle and knew that Sylvia called me. Even as I went below the North Foreland loomed its menacing head to starboard. Joe was giving us a little more port to his helm to bring us well inside the Goodwins, and I took below with me the news that we were entering the Straits of Dover, and that there was an English Fleet in full view anchored in The Downs.

"Is anything wrong?" asked Sylvia.

She was as tidy and fresh as if she'd been up and dressed (with all the necessities of her toilet table at her disposal) for hours. I caught sight of a hand-glass on one of the bunks.

"Not it," said I. "But I need not ask if you have slept well. I believe you really enjoy roughing it."

"Oh I do," she cried. "But I should be so much obliged if you would get me some water, to freshen my hands and face."

Of course there was no fresh water for washing purposes. Old Joe could not be expected to provide that. But a dash of brine from a bucket slung over the lee side soon

brought even more colour to the girl's face. When she stepped on deck she was as fair and radiant as anything on earth or sea that rose from its night's rest that morning.

"Now yew're on deck, miss," said Doubler, coming for'ard with a pull at his forelock, "I'll goo below an' see arter brekkust. I reckon as yew can dew wi' a bite, an' I know our young maaster can. He allust was a booy for his wittles. He was!"

Sylvia had taken my arm as a support in the pitching boat, for though the sea was less choppy since we had the tide under us, the wind and tumult of the waves made a nasty cross lipper as we neared the straits.

I was drawing Sylvia's attention to the square yards and mighty hulks of the war ships in the Downs (alas! what would a score of the huge masted under-engined ironclads of which we were so proud in 1870 have done against the *Dreadnought*?) when she begged eagerly for my binoculars which slung in a case at my side. To my surprise she did not level them towards England, but to the south'ard.

"See there," she cried. "There's a French squadron sailing west."

"The deuce there is!" I cried.

"That doan't sigerfy, maaster," said old Joe. "They oan't interfare along o' us sa long as we kape out o' their t'ree mile limit."

But I remembered that we should have to shoot to the south before very long, and I wondered if we should see that squadron or any member of it too near to be pleasant. I was soon to learn.

## CHAPTER IX

### A BRUSH WITH THE FRENCHMEN

THROUGHOUT the day the wind held steady, and so long as we made a lee under the chalk cliffs between Ramsgate and Hastings the sea was no more than the drifter could live through with ease, though we saw more than one south coast trawler making for Ramsgate, close hauled, and looking as if they had had enough of it. The French squadron away to port was hull down, but we could see that there was no steamer or ironclad with them. Probably the vessels formed part of Admiral Fourichon's fleet, which had been ordered to blockade Havre. They were under easy sail, and with our canvas (for though we carried but two sails, and both of those reefed, there was a press of sail for our little dandy) we rather gained on them than they on us. But, if we were to take the shortest course to the Bay we must soon bear away towards the French coast, or at any rate towards mid channel, and what we might meet with there from sea and sail no man could tell. However, the day passed peacefully enough for such as could stand the perpetual pitching and tossing, and when dark fell with the Isle of Wight far to starboard old Joe deter-

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mined to "chance the mossoos" and bore away freer to pass Alderney as close as prudence permitted.

The night was dark with cloud and mirk, though the moon gave a grudging shimmer until she took her crescent quarter below. By now we had grown so used to the violence of the weather that even Sylvia was getting her sea legs. So keen and invigorating was the air we breathed that even that dainty lady ate the plain food, the fried weavers and gurnards, the thick chunks of fried bacon, the coarse onion stews of which Doubler (our cook by rating of his supreme culinary ability, and not, as is usual on sea-going craft, on the grounds of his incompetence) was inordinately proud. It delighted me, hale east coast man as I was, to see her pretty white teeth meeting in a fisherman's muffin—a hard biscuit, soaked in water and then placed on the hob of the galley fire to swell and soften, and, finally, when soft, fragrant and delicious, spread generously with good wholesome and well flavoured salt farmhouse butter! Every moment the girl lost that foreign look which was doubtless a throw back to her old Huguenot ancestors—every moment her comradeship became dearer to me. Despite the novelty of our surroundings it seemed to me that we were rather on a picnicking cruise than on a mission which might mean life and death to me—and possibly to her; but of that I would not think.

When it was time to turn in, and all seemed

going well, Sylvia again took her rest in the cuddy, and (after Rumbo had had his sleep) I made my couch again on the spare canvas in the forepeak. But this time it was so wet with the spinnaker that I could not sleep, and, thinking that I might have a nap in the cuddy while Sylvia was on deck the next day, I shoved up the scuttle and clambered on deck again.

I found that I had snoozed an hour or so before the damp struck through my heavy clothing and woke me. We were still keeping a course which would bring us close in to the Channel Islands, and I sincerely hoped that the French ships were on their home side of them. Otherwise we might find ourselves in their midst at daybreak. Even as it was it seemed advisable to douse all lights. It might be argued by an innocent landsman that we could be in no danger, that we were harmless people, and had as much right on the high seas as the French Fleet. All this was true enough. But at sea a vessel's passport is her papers, and we had none. We were obviously a dandy-rigged drifter, numbered 532 Lowestoft, and what lawful business could take us near the Channel Islands? Moreover, however well I might pass as a genuine fisherman there was Sylvia to be considered. And she carried papers to Bazaine—papers from the Empress which would have made our case dangerous in the extreme if vessels of the Republican government got hold of them upon her or any of us.

As I thought of this I was glad that the wet spinnaker had prevented me from sleeping in the eyes of the dandy. Old Joe was a splendid fisherman, and I doubted not that he had had a long and profitable experience as a smuggler, in evading revenue cutters and coastguard boats and their like. But how would he frame if he were run aboard by a French man-o'-war and confronted with a force which there was no hope of resisting. I knew that the greatest joy of his life had been a rough and tumble fight with the revenue people. But the French navy, even in 1870, was very different from our own revenue service. It was just as well, I thought in my self-conceit, that the old fellow and his sons should be "stiffened" by a gentleman.

Of course in our little boat we had no such thing as a patent log line, or any modern invention whereby we might have checked our rate of sailing, taken our bearings, and ascertained our whereabouts to a nicety. So long as we had kept within sight of land old Joe knew well enough by the headlands where we were. But he was not familiar with the lights of the French coast or the Channel Islands, and we went on our foaming way through the night at nearly ten knots an hour, in a happy-go-lucky way which would have seemed more correct to Columbus than to any more recent mariner.

Old Joe had the tiller, Dory was at the cleat round which the fores'l sheet was belayed (for if the head's'l sheets can be eased



at a moment's notice there's little to fear from a gust however sudden and sharp), Rumbo was taking his watch below on the nets battened down in the fish well, and Doubler was smoking hard by the mains'l halyards. Nothing was left to chance so far as the actual sea-faring was concerned. It was only the course and the danger of collision that gave me a feeling of hesitation—the sort of feeling which one has when there's something wrong in the air which is as yet unknown and unguessed at.

"Here ye be agin, Maaster Hinnery," said the old man. "Tha'ss right I say," he muttered, bending his grizzled moustache close to my ear. "D'ye reckon as them Frenchies be a sailin' lights out same as us or no?"

"Oh!" said I, forgetting the blockade for the moment and only remembering that the German Fleet was a matter of no importance, "I should think they'll keep lights going for the sake of neutral traffic."

"Well, that may be soo," said old Joe, spitting doubtfully over the lee bulwarks. "But I ha' felt a sail near us this half hour. Orften an' orften hev I kind o' smelt out a sail of a dark night when we wuz arter tubs an' what not. An' if we bain't cloose aboard a wessel, ah! an' a big 'un, my name bain't Joosiph Thaxter. There! Hark a' that? Doan't yew hear narthen?"

I strained my ears, and peered out into the night. But for the flashes of phosphorescence (very rare in the hard breeze and lumpy sea)



here and there where the white horses leapt the Channel was as dark as the forepeak with the scuttle down. I could see nothing, even the end of our boom was so vague that imagination fancied it as extending in its well-laced rotundity for an unknown distance out across the billows.

"Hark!" again said old Joe.

Again I strained my ears, closing my eyes on this occasion so as to concentrate all my will power on the one sense of hearing. I heard the pounding of our bows through the seas; I heard the ceaseless rustle, and moaning surging of the waves in their unending struggle for supremacy; I heard the creak of the gaskets and of the mast as a smart puff heeled us over; I heard the rattle of the free reef ties on the taut stretched canvas; I heard the complaint of the throat of the gaff, the rattle of the fores'l block, the dash of the flying scud on deck and on sail. But that was all. These sounds, as I listened to them with all my intensity, seemed to grow to a thunderous volume, to roar and rage till fancy almost made me put my fingers to my ears so terrible was the uproar to my concentrated attention. But of any other vessel which might be nigh us I neither heard nor saw a sound or a vestige.

I looked at old Joe. "No," said I, "I can hear nothing."

Hardly were the words out of my mouth when old Joe gave a mighty roar. "Stand by to go about," he yelled, jamming the tiller down so that we shot up into the eye

of the wind. "Niver yew mind a lookin', maaster," he yelled at me. "Dew that arterwards. Lend a hand wi' the gear for Gord's sake or she'll be aboard on us."

I rushed to the main sheet and hauled in as fast as I knew how. The sudden luff of the little craft had thrown the wind out of her sails, and the mains'l and boom were flapping nastily till I got the sheet taut and the boom firm inboard. Doubler and Dory had eased the fores'l sheet from its cleat and were holding on to the weather sheet while the dandy paid off on the other tack. Presently they let go the weather sheet with a run, and hauled in on the lee, which was comfortably belayed by the time that it drew taut with the breeze. Then as we gathered way, I looked astern, and there, in a mighty wave of white fury, I saw the huge dolphin striker of a frigate uprearing within a boat's length of our stern post. For a moment, as we held on our new course, almost directly opposite to that we had been set before, I thought that our unimportance or our smallness had saved us from observation. Quicker than I can tell how it happened the frigate loomed out, opposite to, past us. But before the leading vessel had disappeared in the darkness there came a hail from her decks, which told us that we had been seen or that old Joe's shout had been heard. "*Ho! Aho! Ho du navire!*" came to us, and the last sight we had of the leading frigate was of some one aboard her as far aft as he could get, shouting and gesticulating. Would

she hold her course? But then the second in line appeared on the scene, and there were flashes of light intermittent but evidently affording intelligence to the second vessel, for instead of keeping on dead in the wake of the first ship she had come up in the wind some points before she reached us, otherwise we should probably have been out of sight of her.

"*Ho. Du navire! Quel navire?*"

"Ho! ho! ho!" laughed old Joe. "I niver could onnerstan' their lingo. There's on'y one Franch word as I know, an' tha'ss brarndy."

We were now dashing and pitching short and sharp through the head seas which came over our bows every second and sent a stream of brine aft before it could all escape through the scuppers. The little dandy kicked and plunged like a young horse, and her masts and yards creaked till they seemed like to be jerked clean out of her. But we were making headway fast into the gloom of night into which, if once we vanished, it would take the Froggies all their time to follow us, for a square yarder takes ten times as long to go about as a fore and aft rigged vessel, and, so far as we had seen as yet, there were no cutters nor schooners, nor even corvettes, with the French squadron. We might dodge 'em yet.

"Can't ye spake their lingo, Maaster Hinnery?" asked old Joe. "I reckon a word or tew on it ud satisfy 'em."

It was not a bad idea. But I doubted if my accent was good enough for the purpose, and,

moreover, they might have heard old Joe's voice.

"Lucile de Havre," I shouted, choosing Havre so that I might show off my French by sounding the "e" in the "de" though the "H" in Havre was inaudible,—save in theory.

But my French and the French of the North Sea and Channel Gallic fishermen are two different things. The warship had caught a fleeting glimpse of us, and knew that we were a fishing craft, nay, they must have known that we were an east coast fishing boat, for no one who has ever sailed in the North Sea could fail to distinguish the difference in the cut of the sails and the set of the sticks between a Frenchy and a Lowestoft or Yarmouth boat.

"Christ!" roared old Joe, "look out. Round she goo agin!"

He shoved the tiller down and up we shot on this occasion, sailing close hauled when we put about. We were round in an instant.

The manœuvres in which the old man had indulged had been well imagined, for they would have brought us through the French line on the Normandy side of it; but the squadron must have been sailing in more extended order than we thought, for despite the difference in our line of sailing, there we were again right in the thick of them. But we paid off about full and by till we gained way enough to shoot up in the wind again with a good run of pace under us.

This time, however, we were closely followed by a French brigantine, probably a gunboat,

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whose fore and aft canvas on her mainmast enabled her to luff more quickly than the square riggers. But who had the pace? That was the thing, for even as we settled again on a close-hauled course, with the wind on our starboard bow, I could see the brigantine hauling her wind after us, and reaching her long bows like a pike after a roach.

"Thank Gord for the good dark," said Joe. "Bors, doan't none on ye make a deen. Us'll dew 'em now or may I niver run sparrits agin."

Indeed it seemed that the smart little dandy had the foot of the Frenchman. But by now the whole squadron was on the alert and we saw flashes ahead of our course which forced us to up helm a trifle and bear away.

This deprived us of much of the benefit of our rig, for, full and by, or free, a brigantine was as good as a dandy, and the weight of the great vessel must tell in such a sea as that which we were now enduring. Happily for us we saw the lights which had flashed to windward (in answer to those from the vessels which had seen us) sheer more and more to starboard, leaving us a clearer course in the eye of the wind, and again we luffed. The brigantine was not beyond hailing distance on a calm day, but with the uproar of the gale and the sea in one's ears there was little chance for a human voice that was not pitched right at one's elbow.

A hoarse rumbling from a speaking trumpet joined in the chorus and turned its harmony

to cacophany. Then a still more dissonant note sounded. There was a flash from a chassepot, a report that sounded incredibly petty in the wash of the waves and the exultation of the gale, and a rifle bullet came with a "plop" clean into our mizzen mast.

"Blast 'em," said old Joe. "They couldn't ha' hit that stick if they'd tried for a month. Pinch it, old gal. Pinch it," he cried caressingly to his boat, feeling with his sensitive hand (for in spite of the hardness of its exterior no hand can feel the meaning of the secrets of the tiller like a fisherman's) how the craft tried and tried to edge more and more into the wind whither no war vessel in the world could follow us without steam.

Seeing that we held on, and thinking, I suppose, that if we kept on as we were going we should soon be out of sight, the Frenchman declared war in a way there could be no misunderstanding. A light flared over the sea long enough to show us the bows and figurehead of our pursuer, and to see the foaming beneath her forefoot as she trod the seas under over which we danced as lightly as a cork. Then, as though veiling the flare, a puff of sepia cloud. Then darkness, and invisibility following on the light, but deafened by a roar from a bow chaser which she had fired point blank at us. Fortunately the sea was, as has been said, high and choppy, uncertain and mischievous, or that would have been the last of the *Kittiwake* and of our mission for France and Eugénie. Even as it was,

so short was the range that the Frenchmen could not miss us by more than a few inches, and I felt the breath of the ball as it hurtled over us and plumped into the sea to windward.

"Pratty nigh took the p'int o' my nose off," said old Joe, feeling his finely coloured bridge and nostrils. "Pinch it, pinch it, yew little titty bewty," he apostrophized his darling boat; and the little beauty "pinched it" more and more, so that before the Frenchmen could fire their other bow chaser we were so far to windward that they could see nothing of us and must needs shoot at random. Their next shot, however, was well judged, and only went a few yards ahead of us. So old Joe gave a chuckle, and again eased away once more. We saw the flash which only served to make the night more dark when once its momentary brilliance was gone, and again came the boom. This time the ball went nowhere near us, and from that moment every time they fired they were further off, till they realized that they were wasting powder and shot, time and trouble.

Then I noticed that a figure was near me, which I would not have believed could have approached me without my being aware of it. A soft hand came upon my arm. "Is it all over, Harry?" whispered a soft voice in my ear. And for my part I felt a soft fool in that the stress and excitement of being fired at, the work at the gear necessitated by our changes of course, and the amusement of watching old Joe's dexterous dodging of the French,

had for the time driven Sylvia from my mind. But I was quite pleased to think that it should be so, for I was Maggie's lover, and of course she stood first with me. Then I remembered that even if Sylvia had been forgotten for a moment, I had thought of her when first we ran across the squadron. When had I last thought of Maggie? Last night? It seemed a year ago!

"Ho! ho! ho!" roared old Joe. "Done 'em proper an' no mistake! Come yew here, Rumbo. I'll take a spell. Put her sou' by west, an' kape her there, an' stir me up if anything go wrong."

"No, dear," I whispered in answer to Sylvia's question. "But we've had a narrow escape from the French blockading squadron. Now we're all right. Go down again and get some more sleep."

To my surprise she obeyed me like any child.

I think that neither of us noticed at the time that I had called her "dear."



## CHAPTER X

A BOAT RACE ! FOUR FRENCH v. TWO ENGLISH

WE had survived one danger, that of being incontinently sunk by the ships of the nation which we were risking our lives to help. But it remained to be seen how we should stand when daylight made gunnery practice a less haphazard affair than it had been by night. Moreover, if the wind continued its force there would be an awful sea in the Bay. Old Joe lowered himself down into the forepeak for his spell, impervious as he was to wet spinnakers or anxiety ; but I had no mind for sleep, and stayed beside Rumbo, who had taken the tiller from his father and was now steering a course to bring us round Ushant well out. Had the gale been less, I thought, it might have been to our advantage to bring to or to edge over towards the English coast so as to round the north-western point of France by night. But to do that we should have to dodge about for another day. And with such a sea as there was it would have been foolhardy to prolong our voyage, and we must take our chance of interference from the French ships at Brest and trust to the luck which had hitherto favoured us.

Dawn broke with a brighter look to windward, and even before the sun appeared, there was a distinct decrease in the strength of the gale. As the sky grew golden and peeps of blue changed the angry slate of the sea to a reflection of their own azure loveliness, I felt the wind come more from the east. This would suit us to perfection, for with the wind off shore we might find comfortable sailing under the lee of the French coast, even in the Bay, if only we dare run in close enough under the shelter of the land. It was a strong westerly breeze that we feared, one which would bring the Atlantic rollers storming from America to France and stir up such mountainous undulations, such mighty cascades of broken crests, that a craft of our size would be in imminent peril of being submerged at any moment.

As soon as the sun was up well enough to light the sea from horizon to horizon we saw that we were alone on the tumbling waste. Whether the French ships had given up the effort to find us or had gone about on their blockading business with the idea that we were too insignificant to matter did not concern us. The coast was clear. We had the sea to ourselves so far as we could see, and when Sylvia came on deck I went down into the cuddy for a sleep with an easy mind.

When I returned to the deck old Joe was again at the tiller, with Sylvia by his side, laughing at some of the old man's yarns.

"There ye be, maaster," said the old man,

pointing over our port bow. "D'ye see that headland a'moost hull down?"

I did not. The old man could see as far with his naked eye as I could with my binoculars. I focussed my glass and looked in the direction in which he pointed. There was a tiny speck of opacity projecting from the sea.

"Tha'ss Ushant," said Joe. "Us'll take a look in."

The wind was now coming almost due east, and we had to edge in with our sails as flat as boards. There were no tall masts and square yards to be seen. We might venture in closer out of the tremendous sea which was rising as we neared the Atlantic.

It was dark again before we drew in south of Brest, and began to consider where we should land.

"Tha'ss Belle Eel," said Joe, pointing to a light ahead. And at once my mind flew to the Vicomte de Bragelonne. Who does not remember the adventures of d'Artagnan on the Brittany coast? His visit to Aramis at the Bishop's Palace at Vannes? His trip across to the island to spy out the fortifications which Porthos was superintending. His return to the Bishop's house and his furious ride back to Paris? Ah! Land of romance! Was even d'Artagnan confronted with a task more difficult than that which lay before us? Although there had been ships in sight which looked suspicious from our point of view, when darkness fell, we proceeded on our course inside Belle Isle with caution.

We knew that it was more than likely that there might be some small coasting government vessel off Quiberon, and we steered in without lights and as silently as if we knew we were in the midst of the enemy.

The setting of the sun had softened the wind to little more than a pleasant sailing breeze, and before we shifted our helm to draw inside between Belle Isle and the Quiberon Peninsula we had shaken out all reefs, run out our bowsprit, and were sailing under full plain canvas. The moon had sunk over the coast of Brittany before we sheered close inshore, but the sky was now clear of clouds and the stars gave sufficient light for us to see some distance about us. We drew in rapidly, helped by the currents which are so powerful between the islands and the mainland, and at first it seemed as if we should effect our landing without any trouble. But as we came within hearing of the breakers on the coast their wash and roar prepared us for a terrific surf. However, there was nothing for it but to attempt a landing where best we could, and irrespective of the whereabouts of the chateau to which the Duc de Touraine had directed us. We must get ashore and see what Sylvia's command of French and our well-filled pockets would do for us. Unhappily we knew that there was little French spoken among the Breton peasants, and neither Sylvia nor I were conversant with the Keltic dialect of the Bretons.

Although the wash of the surf sounded

so terrific we sailed in fairly calm waters. It was useless to delay.

"Come, Joe," said I. "Get the boat over. We'll make a trial at landing."

"Well, well, bor," said old Joe. "That'll be a tidy job, an' I fare right wexed to part wi' ye an' yar pratty young lady. But the best o' frinds must part. Oover she go, Rumbo. Yew an' Doubler had better go with our maaster."

The three sons caught hold of the one stout boat which was lashed aft, and, with a yeo heave ho (which I was too late to stop) the rowboat plunged in astern, whence she was presently brought forward amidships under our lee. Sylvia was ready, and we both had our few belongings packed for the landing, so, with a hearty shake of the hand from those we left aboard, I swung into the boat where Rumbo and Doubler were awaiting me, holding her off and steadying her with their hands on the bulwarks.

Sylvia held Dory's hand and stood for a moment with both her tiny feet on the bulwarks, then she bent forward and fell into my arms.

My heart beat thick so as nearly to choke me as I held her, and sensed the dainty perfume of her personality. But I placed her on the stern thwart without holding her closer than the circumstances of the case needed. When, I thought, should I be able to look on her as a comrade and nothing more? When should I be able to ignore

that fascination of sex which thrilled me to the centre of my being when I touched her ?

"This daay foortnight I'll stand on and off from sunset to sunrise, wind and weather permittin'," were Joe's farewell words. "When ye want a boat off to ye, show a glim. Good luck tee ye."

We pushed off from the *Kittiwake's* side, and Rumbo and Doubler took to their oars manfully. I held the steering oar again, and brought the boat's nose almost dead for land, heading a little to the nor'ard to counteract the current. We had little more than half a mile to row to the shore, but as we drew near I found that old Joe had brought us to the one spot of all others in the neighbourhood which was suitable for such a landing as ours. The mouth of the river Vilaine was sucking us in on a flood tide, and by making our way a short distance up the river we should avoid all danger of being dashed on rock or sand by the surf. I headed the boat into what I could both feel and see was the centre of the current running up river, and our rowers had but to paddle easily to give me steering way while the current bore us more and more swiftly inshore.

We had had the thought to muffle our oars and our gentle paddling made but little noise. Thus it was that we first observed the approach of a strongly rowed boat coming down the river. We shipped oars for a time, and listened. Presently a hoarse but cheery voice began to sing, and the words were

French, not the patois of the province. Then another voice, as of one in authority, broke in and bade the singer be silent. An altercation followed, and was conducted so vigorously that we were able to make out that the boat held a party of bluejackets who were returning to their ship somewhere near.

I looked out to sea, and could make out nothing either of the French vessel or the *Kittiwake*. Probably old Joe had heard the song, for his hearing was as marvellous as his sight, and had drawn off a bit to be out of the way.

I determined to drift on, hoping that the boat would pass us wide enough to enable us to creep in unseen. But it soon became apparent that the current was driving us towards the boat, and that unless we took to our oars we should pass within two or three boats'-length of the well-manned gig. I drew my breath in sharply as I became certain that this was so, and I felt Sylvia's hand on my arm. It was firm and soft, and its gentle pressure gave me courage. I looked in her face. It was as serene and beautiful as ever.

I signed to the men to row and they pulled as quietly as they could. But muffled oars are not noiseless. Their thudding in the rowlocks is muted slightly, and that is all; but even though we cannot have been more than twenty or thirty yards from the gig we were not discovered by the strangers till they had passed us and were to seaward of us.

Then there was a sharp exclamation and a cry of "qui va là?"

I motioned to the men to row their hardest and they spun the boat along up stream at a grand pace. We were almost out of sight in the tricky starlight when the command for us to stop came over the water. Of course we did not obey, chancing the probable indisposition of a crew returning to its ship for a chase after so insignificant a party as we must have appeared. But for some reason or other the Frenchmen were not so easily disposed of. They shouted again, and, though I could no longer see them, I could hear from the wash of oars and the sound of the working rowlocks, to say nothing of the words of command, that the gig had swung round and was in pursuit. Had the party firearms with them? If so we were in a tight place indeed.

I had noticed the French boat as it passed, and thought it heavy and clumsy. Had we a chance of escape? Even if we held our own at rowing should we not be brought up by some obstacle before we got far up the river?

The shouting astern grew eager and incessant. The officer (or rather officers, for it could not have been a common Jack who was singing when first we heard the boat) were encouraging their men with all the energy and "verve" of their race. But their boat was heavy, and the arms of Rumbo and Doubler were strong. The French party was probably full of the wine of the country.



Anyhow we held our own. Clearly there were no firearms aboard the other boat or we should have had a shot at us. What then could be the nature of the party? Surely no boat-load of naval men in time of war would be about without firearms!

I did not then know that this was merely typical of the gross carelessness and negligence which characterized most of the French operations, whether naval or military, during the war. But however unfortunate this carelessness was for France, it served us a good turn that night.

We were by this time well within the river banks, and we could see them, dark and sombre in the starlight, closing in on us. It seemed to me that we drew further away, and I ventured to give a shout of encouragement to our gallant oarsmen. Just then the set of the inflowing tide brought our boat close in under the left bank of the Villaine. At this place it was thickly wooded to the edge of the shore, and the shadows hung very dark almost over the entire river. My shout had enraged the French so that they were rowing furiously after us, and, for the first time for some minutes, I caught sight of their bow leaping and foaming with its ugly blunt lines. What a tub!

Again I cried to our men, a good British cry, and they tore their oars through the water. The excitement of the race was intense. Never had I been so stirred by a boat struggle between Baitsbite and the Pike

and Eel on the Cam, or between Putney and Mortlake. This might be a race for life. I bent forward and swayed my body, seizing Rumbo's stroke oar and helping him—a justifiable trick in a heavy sea boat, though inadvisable in a racing craft. I heard a little laugh beside me, and turning saw Sylvia with her eyes aflame, her hands pressed together, her head bent forward, enjoying the excitement as keenly as myself. Then, for the first time, I was able to regard her as a comrade—and what a comrade! But I had no time for that sort of consideration then. Now they gained, now we gained. They shouted too much and wasted their breath, but they rowed hard.

"Where are the papers?" I whispered to Sylvia. It would never do for her to be taken with the Empress's letter to Bazaine upon her. In the then temper of France, or of that part of France which called itself the government, it might mean death to her.

"I have them here," she answered, pressing her hand to her bosom.

"Get ready to throw them overboard," I whispered. "They must not be found on you."

"Have we no chance?" she asked, with a catch in her voice, which told me how much she had this affair of ours at heart.

I hated to discourage her. But, in truth, what chance had we? Even if we succeeded in shaking off the boat astern of us for a time, there could be no doubt but that before we

got much higher up the river we should be brought up by some river patrol or revenue service men. At least that was how it seemed to me. Still, while there is life there is hope, and while there is breath in the body and stamina in the arms the race is not over till the goal is reached.

"Not much, I fear," said I. "But, by George, how well our men pull! Now! now! now!" I shouted at each stroke, just as in the old days along the Cam when there wanted but another foot or two to bring off a "bump." Gallantly did Rumbo and Doubler ply their good ash oars. In their stalwart hands the clumsy uncouth sea oars were as the sculls of a wager boat. But their breath was beginning to labour and at each stroke there came a grunt of effort. The gig in chase was pulling four oars, but still the race was even. A magnificent effort on the part of our men took us out of sight of the pursuing boat. I was cheering on the men with this, eagerly looking round for any new peril, when just as the set of the tide took us so close in to the left bank of the river that bow's oar nearly touched the "putty" I heard a grating nasal voice cry from invisibility, "In here to your right, stranger. Right in this way."

I had the presence of mind to obey without question, and with a strong swerve of the steering oar I brought our nose dead straight for what looked like a wall of obscurity under some low hanging boughs of alder and

ash which still retained much of their summer foliage. It needed some nerve to steer head on for what might be the bank in shadow. But there was a chance that the voice meant safety, and it seemed to be the only chance there was. To my delight our bows went through that wall of darkness. I whispered hurriedly "ship oars," and as the ash paddles came inboard something caught our bows and drew us swiftly up into the shadow of what now appeared to be a dyke or creek leading out of the river.

"Low bridge," came the cry of the nasal voice again, and, with a chuckle, I understood, and pressing Sylvia's head down I motioned to the men to duck even as I did. We were barely in time, for the sweeping branches of the overhanging boughs caught Doubler and brushed his back hair for him as we shot up the dyke in silence. The boughs were scarce disturbed by our passage. In less time than it has taken to write of it we were out of the river, hidden in the dense shadow, safe for the time being, at rest in a tiny dyke which was only just wide enough to contain our boat.

Motionless we lay, stifling our curiosity as to the extraordinary chance which had brought some English-speaking person to our aid in so timely and dramatic a manner. Bending low we could see out into the tideway under the boughs which screened us, ourselves in dense shadow, secure from observation. We heard the cries of the French officers, as they

urged their crew on to greater effort, crying out that we were but just out of sight ahead and promising rewards for our capture. We saw the foaming rotundity of their clumsy bows come in sight round the left corner of our dyke, we saw the whole boat pass, and heard the puffing labouring breathing of the oarsmen—who seemed to be in no condition for a boat race—we saw the eager officers in the stern bending backwards and forwards, gesticulating after the manner of their race, and we saw the whole boat and its crew go walloping past out of sight up the river. It was hard not to cheer. But it would have been a fatal absurdity.

Then, and not till then, I looked round for our ally.

"Wal, stranger," came the voice again. "I reckon I came in sort o' handy."

A tall scraggy figure emerged from beneath the spreading shadow of one of the trees by the side of the dyke, and bent down to our boat. "Shake," said the voice, and I "shook." Then I saw the instrument with which our friend had hauled us up the dyke. It was a lasso.

## CHAPTER XI

### WE FIND ALLIES AND A TEMP'RARY RETIREMENT

"WELL——" I began in my surprise. But the friend in need placed his hand upon his mouth, and a warning "s-s-sh !" stopped me from saying more. In the river astern of us the sound of the Frenchmen's oars grew fainter and fainter, their cries less and less distinguishable. When scarce one or the other could be heard the man upon the bank spoke.

"Wal, stranger," said he, in the accent that had proclaimed him a Yankee from the first, "I guess I'm glad to hear good Amurrican, though you do speak it with a British accent. May I *invite* you to step ashore? I *presume* that you are not inclined for any further match pullin' to-night."

I felt Sylvia's hand touch mine, and heard her give a low laugh of amusement at the serene readiness of our new friend. She whispered, "I think we'd better do as he says. I don't believe too much in the Marquis de Belle Isle, and even if I did his château is some way south of here."

"We can see about that when we have got ashore and learnt more about our friend here," I whispered in reply. Then I said

aloud to the man on the bank, "Thank you. We shall be pleased to get ashore and to thank you still more for your timely assistance. Just at present, you know, I can hardly realize where I am. You appeared so opportunely, and so unexpectedly, that it all seems rather bewildering as yet."

The man gave a sniggering laugh, which was not wanting in the heartiness which a "snigger" usually lacks. Then he held out his hand to help Sylvia ashore, and said to her with the utmost impressment, "Allow me, madam."

She looked up in his face and laughed. "Thank you," said she, "I shall be ready to take advantage of your politeness in one minute. But I *must* say good-bye to our good friends here. She looked at Rumbo and Doubler. "Oh," said she, "We shall never be able to show you how grateful we are for all your hard work and risk. Why should you have toiled to escape but for our sakes? Why, indeed, need you have run the risk of the voyage at all?" She held her hand out to Rumbo, who, after wiping his own right hand gracefully on the seat of his sea trousers, took it, while with the left he pulled a forelock.

"No need for that, miss," said he. "Our young maaster he ha' paid us well, an' if yew'll escewse me a sayin' so, there bain't many o' us feeshin' chaps as ouldn't risk their skins for a pratty lady like yew, miss. Ah! An' jolly an' frindly an' all, an' as

good a sailor as iver stepped aboard the *Kittiwake*. I reckon our maaster ought ta be proud on ye."

Now, considering that Rumbo knew very well that I was to marry his parson's daughter, this was a very improper thing for him to say. But he meant well.

Doubler went through the same performance with his hand and his forelock (the fine fellows had never been spoilt by a board-school!), and then "up an' spook" as he would have said himself. "Yew ha' heerd Rumbo, miss," said he. "Well, all I can say is dittoo to that. Dittoo I says, an' dittoo I manes. An' I wish ye farewell booth on ye, an' the best o' luck."

The honest fellows gripped my hand without embarrassment. I was more or less one of themselves, and I am convinced that they regarded me with sincere affection. Sylvia was helped ashore by the polite Yankee, and I was about to step after her when Doubler touched me. "I beg y' pardon, Maaster Hinnery," said he, with a look of intense good will and shrewdness on his jolly face. "But if I should happen ta hev a word wi' Miss Maggie, should a tall her as she'd best look out arter another chap? I reckon as yew ha' found a betterer' an her, an' I wish ye joy wi' all my heart."

How could I be angry at so much good will! But of course he did not understand that when a gentleman has pledged his word there is no backing out for him. "No, no," I



muttered. "You don't understand, old Doubler. There's nothing of that sort between Miss Dumergue and me."

Doubler's face wreathed into a thousand wrinkles, each of which told its tale of mirthful incredulity. "Ah!" said he. "Yew are a *mark*! Yew allust wuz," with which cryptic remark he subsided on to his thwart.

Then said Rumbo, "I reckon us uns had best be a gittin' out while them t'others be up strame. Come on, Doubler bor, le'ss be a gittin' back ta the *Kitti*. Put yar back intew't." Then he whispered behind his hand in a hoarse rumble which he fondly believed was audible to no one but myself, but which was plain for any one to hear within a radius of some yards. "This day foortnit. Wait for yar glim." He gave an immense wink, sat down in the boat, and shoved off. In a few seconds the *Kittiwake's* boat had disappeared through the screen of boughs, and was pulling hard towards the offing against the flood, which was now, fortunately, declining to slack water.

"Sir," said our friend to me as soon as I had turned away my head from listening to the *Kittiwake's* departing boat. "If you call me Abner Tingey you'll get right there. Will you favour me?"

I looked at him before I answered him, and, if I shut my eyes now, six and thirty years after that night of our first meeting, I can still see him clearly as he was then. A man of immense height, quite five inches

taller than my six feet when he stretched himself upright, with tapering stooping shoulders which cannot have measured more than thirty-two or three inches round the chest. A long lath of a man, with lean, long flapping arms, which hung down awkwardly beside him like the arms of a gorilla. His face was extraordinarily long and thin, his nose hawk-like, his cheek bone prominent and flat, his chin pronounced and, in profile, sharp as a hatchet. His mouth was thin lipped but of a generous width, and the mobility of his expression kept his lips always in motion. A long goatee depended from beneath his lower lip, and a three or four days' ragged growth of hair covered most of his face, but not so as to conceal its acute lines. His eyes were long and narrow, surrounded by crows' feet, and as little inclined to immobility as his lips. But I did not see that their colour was a fine deep brown till I caught the sun laughing in them on the following morning. His legs were thin and straight as those of a heron. His whole body stooped or jerked itself sideways. There seemed to be no flesh on the man. Yet, despite his uncouthness, there was an air of great strength and toughness about him. I should have given him about forty-five years in age. But the extent of his experience was impossible to estimate. He often seemed to me to have the wisdom of centuries. His voice was nasal, as has been said, but did not always drawl. His movements were quick and nervous.

As he drawled out his name and gave me an opening to inform him of ours he swung in his hand the lasso with which he had hauled our boat up the dyke out of the tide-way. He looked straight ahead, as if he did not wish to inconvenience me by too close an inspection while I gave him such name as I chose. He was quite capable of such delicacy. For my part I hesitated. The fact of Sylvia's companionship with me was one which required careful handling. If I introduced her as my wife it might result in our being placed together in circumstances to which it would be impossible to submit. And if she were not my wife what was she? Clearly the wisest thing to do was to assume the position of a brother towards her. There was no resemblance between us. But that is not unusual with brothers and sisters.

Sylvia had her hand on my arm, and in some curious way or other I could sense her curiosity as she waited for my answer, and at the same time feel that she was telling me mutely that she trusted me in all things. Surely I would indeed be a brother to her.

"My name is Harry Fisher," said I, "a Suffolk man. This is my sister Sylvia." I burst out laughing, not at the falsity of my introduction, but at the curious place and time for such an introduction to take place. And Tingey understood me. He gave a guttural chuckle which came up from his wrinkled throttle with a rattle. "Queer place to meet," said he. "But let's leave

palaver till we are safer and under cover. We can have a pow wow then. Say? are you on?"

Obviously it was the thing to do.

I had felt from Sylvia's touch that she concurred in the relationship. It was a night of concurring. There were we two, blandly marching alongside a man of whom we had never even heard before, being led we knew not whither, while all the time the mere fact of our being on French soil was a danger, but going as quietly and contentedly as if we had known this Tingey (if that was indeed his name) all our lives. Who and what he was never troubled our minds. He had served us at a critical moment, and somehow, as soon as we were ashore his personality impressed upon us that he was incapable of treachery. He might, nay, he would, be a terrible open enemy. But to lead inoffensive strangers into a hostile ambush would be impossible for him. So we went with him with curious equanimity.

Abner Tingey led us swiftly along the dyke till he came to a small bridle path which ran away to the right through wild undergrowth of some density. It was too dark to see the contours of the country about us, but so far as I could make out in the tricky light there were marshes for some distance on the further side of the creek, or dyke, which had afforded us our means of escape. On the side on which we walked, however, we soon came to a firmer footing, and the ground struck hard and stony beneath our feet. Presently Abner

turned sharp to the right and dived beneath the upper covering branches of a thicket through which a tunnel seemed to have been cut. Hardly had we gone ten yards through this (I second, with Sylvia holding on to the tail of my coat) when our guide rose to his full height, and we found that we were at the entrance of some cave or cutting. The sides of the hollow felt like rock. A great brazier glowed comfortably some distance further in the cavern.

"This yer's my temp'ry habitation," said Abner, "and if ye'll come right in I guess I can cast an illoomination on the festyve scenario." (He seemed to roll out the redundant syllables of the last word with an infinite gusto.)

We passed behind him, and watched him draw a screen of faggots or scrub across the entrance to the cave. "Qui vive?" came a French voice, broad with *patois*, and I started, while Sylvia pressed my hand. I was beginning to like these surprises, for Sylvia always seemed to think it necessary to give me courage by compression of her fingers.

"Aoh, dry up, you darned duffer," snarled Abner. "I was calculatin' how long you'd take to assimilate the fact as some one was in your immejit vicinity."

"Ah, m'sieur," cried the French voice in expostulation. "I deed but vait to see vot it vos before I keeled any r-r-r-ascals who might be dangereux."

"That's Alphonse," said Abner coolly.

"He's all right. I saved his life down Mexico way. He's all right. Aren't you, 'Phonse?"

"Ah yais sair. I'm all a raight," said Alphonse.

He might be, but then again he might not. However, there was nothing for us to do but to hope that he was, for if one were wrong the other could not be right. Well, I believed in Abner.

As Alphonse assured us that he was "all a raight," Abner struck a match. It was not a French match, for we were not stifled with sulphur!

In a moment he had lit two candles which stood on little brackets of rock within the cave, which, we could now see, was of considerable dimensions. Alphonse appeared, a short, stout, hardy looking man, with a full bristly black beard, not unlike the type of man I have seen in Cornish fishing boats. But Sylvia knew better. She had been through the greater part of France in the days of the Empire with her father. "A Breton," she whispered.

"Now first, sir," said Abner, "how are ye off for victuals? May I offer you or your sister a bite of anything. We have wild duck, eels, and some sea fish. And, 'Phonse, get out that brandy and wine, will you, and lay the chafer on the charcoal."

We had taken a little food before we left the *Kittiwake*, but we were both too anxious about our landing at the time to do justice to the meal on which Doubler had spent

much trouble. The excitement of the chase and the strangeness of our adventures had awakened my appetite, and Sylvia nodded to me to hint that she would be glad of something to take.

But what right had we to intrude on this man's larder? Hungry as I began to feel myself, I was uneasy at accepting hospitality before we knew more of each other.

"My dear sir," said I, "it's extremely kind and thoughtful of you. But really we have no earthly justification for coming on your hospitality like this."

"Naow stranger," said Abner, looking hurt, "sit you down right there and set your sister aside ye. Didn't I say I was glad to hear good Amurrican even if it was spoke with a British accent. Sit ye down right there and peg into what ye fancy of Aphonse's commissariat. But one word fust. You ain't no spies of this heré Reepublican government?"

I laughed aloud. "My dear sir," said I. "Should we have been chased by a government boat if we were?"

"I guess not," said he. "I reckon I hain't growed my wisdom teeth yet. But short of that I don't care who you are, you're free o' me and mine."

He was so obviously sincere that it would have been a shame to frustrate his hospitable intentions. Alphonse set before us a salmi of mallard cooked to perfection in a chafing-dish in the style of my own land, and a

matelotte of eels, carp and tench, which was delicious. With these and a generous supply of rough red wine we made an admirable meal.

When we had finished I felt that it was time to enter upon explanations of some kind. Whether or not I should tell the truth partially would depend on Abner. I had no intention of telling the whole truth, whatever he might say or do.

"Wal," said Abner. "You've eaten my bread and salt, and if I can tell a critter by its skin I reckon whatever I say to you you'll never bring it up agin me in this yer furrin land. But I tell ye plump and outright that I'm over here with 'Phonse for the sake of that pore Emp'ror and his lovely Empress. His uncle played the straight game for the States, and also and moreover I was with Juarez in Mexico, and when Napoleon gave Bazaine a twister and told him to mind his own blasted business and to clear out as quick as snuff, I swore if ever that mighty prince should have need of pore Abner I'd be right there as quick as knife. And now I'm here I'm blim blammed if I can hit the bull's eye how ta help pore Nap. He's gone bust most terrific, he has, and his lovely wife (at least by all accounts, for I never see the beauty) have skeedaddled to your dull and sombre fatherland."

I broke in here. "My sister is the most trusted friend of the Empress. It is less than a fortnight since she left her at Hastings and it is on her business that we are here now."



"Wal see there naow!" cried Abner. "If the hand of Providence isn't in that where is it? Here am I, a tryin' to ketch another eel or two for 'Phonse ta jelly (but I'm no hand at eel fascinatin' like this here little natyve of the land), when what should I hear but a voice a speakin' British Amurrican, an' what should I see but the man what hollered so friendly to my aural appendages indulgin' in a singular and permiscuous match o' boat pullin' agin a set o' darned Reepublican heelots. What I did I did quick, and you were smart, mister, to take my intimation so handy. I says to myself, 'if I can git them persecuted friends up this here crick it's a dollar to an empty missionary box as I kin lead their wanderin' feet to my halls of dazzlin' light in yonder grotto. And now to think as this yer beauteous lady is intimate with pore Nap's wife. Lady, will ye shake agin for the honour of the Stars and Stripes?"

He held out his huge skinny hand with some timidity. It never occurred to him to doubt my word. He was so honest and straightforward a fellow, in spite of his nationality and his mannerisms, that he trusted us on sight. Or he was such a wonderful judge of character or veracity that he knew that we were speaking the truth—at least, as to the Empress. He never referred to my claimed relationship with Sylvia when he could help it.

Sylvia laid her tiny hand in that great plain of palm, and looked kindly at him.

Somehow both of us felt attracted to this quaint cousin from over the Atlantic. His personality radiated kindliness. It was impossible for us to help liking him.

He held Sylvia's hand as gently, as tenderly, as if it were of frail china. He touched it reverently, with intense delicacy and respect. Then he said in a low voice, evidently quite affected, "I thank you, mam, I feel honoured indeed."

My doubtful policy of entrusting him with part of the truth was immediately justified. Soon we began to think we might trust him further. But that was not yet.

"But," he added, after he had remained sunk in a reverie of gratification for some minutes, "I don't take no stock along of that Bazaine. If ever there was a skunk on aith he's it. He strung up my own brother who was fightin' with Juarez and who had the misfoortin' to get caught after a leetle too much aguardiente, and he carried Juarez's commission in his pocket, and Juarez was the properlie authenticated gin'ral of the Mexican Reepublic. That was the day 'fore I pulled 'Phonse from under the knives of our own men who were mighty sick with the Frenchmen just then, and weren't in favour of lettin' no prisoners have more than five minutes' law afore knifin' em all accordin' to order. But 'Phonse looked at me so pitiful I said I'd go bail for him if they'd give him me, and I'd see what my six-shooter would say if they didn't. So 'Phonse and me hev

both got a down on Bazaine, and both come over to give a hand to Nap—for 'Phonse is mighty pious and don't hold with no Godless reepublics like this yer French lot. Also I reckon that where I go 'Phonse goes."

It was pleasant to see the kindly look with which he looked down on his short companion, and still more pleasant and encouraging to see the look of love and devotion with which the Breton took his master's hand in his and kissed it.

"So ye see," said Abner, in continuation, "that as soon as we heerd in Philadelphia as France and Germany had proposed the great duello and was gettin' their shootin' irons ready, all greased and slick, I raked up the spondoolicks for our j'inf passage over, and we come to this pleasant land of France to fight most energetic by that pore Nap's side. When we got to gay Paree we was told off to catch up Macmahon. But previous to our successful pursuit of that illustrious gin'ral we l'arnt as he had called a royal straight on a low pair, and had lost the whole caboodle. We was kindly recommended to prospect for Bazaine. But, as I have before remarked, I don't take no stock along of that preesumptuous and perfunctory tyrant, and, at the same time, there was whispers as 'Phonse was a deserter, and a friendly party prophesied that things might be made mighty tight for us unless we sought a temp'rary reetirement. Now I didn't know no more of these regions of rowmance than

an Apache, and 'Phonse he kinder hankered after his natyve province, and backed his opinion by tenderin' me his childhood's recollections of this here very grotto. Moreover, and in additional confirmation of our inclination to wend hitherward, we picked up rumours as hereabouts, on the Loire and in its fertile valley, a noo army was to arise in its might. 'Phonse has let his beard grow, and Pinkerton's best man couldn't tell him now for the man he was, while I have permitted this fine and harnsome goatee to adorn my chin for purposes of disguise. We was makin' our preparations to issue forth to seek the ranks of war when here you come. I reckon it's Providence. I do indeed."

"Well," said I. "We have business near Orleans, and then our great desire is to get into Metz. Shall we start together?"

"Orleens will suit the subscriber," said Abner. "As to Metz, well if I thought I could stick a knife into that skunk who's waitin' there to sell his dirty self I'm consarned if I'd not accompany you in your peregrinations. But of that we will discourse on the morrow, as they say in the Sunday-school books. Stranger. Now I reckon you and the lady stand in considerable need of reepose. In yonder concave lies a heap o' rugs. Take it out in sleep. 'Phonse and I will watch your slumbers, for for reasons of convenience which it is unnecessary for me to particularize more fully we have slept by day and woke by night. But now 'Phonse's

beard is grown and my goatee is sure beautiful to look upon we can ride forth as soon as suits our welcome guests, and hosses can be bought or stole. Say ? Have you the dollars?"

I hesitated to answer. Surely it was hazardous to tell this stranger how much gold I still carried about me. But yet I thought he was too simple a man to have hidden a treacherous design under the simplicity of his question. Anyhow, we should have to trust him in things greater than mere lucre. It is always the wisdom of the fool to trust by halves.

"Yes," said I. "We've got enough for any probable expenses."

"So much the better," said Abner. "For I won't deny that my reesources are limited. But now I'll bid ye good-night. Sleep in the sartainty of security. You hain't knowed Abner Tingey long. But the longer you know him, the more you'll know he ain't no coyote."

I rose from the faggot on which I had been sitting, and Sylvia rose with me. Quite simply she accompanied me to the recess which Abner had pointed out. Quite simply she lay down beside me.

"Are you all right?" asked Abner, whom we could still see in the light of the candles, sitting near Alphonse by the side of the brazier. "Then we'll subdoo our nateral n'isiness. Good-night."

"Good-night, madame; good-night, m'sieur," said 'Phonse.

We disposed ourselves for slumber.

## CHAPTER XII

### WE RIDE TO THE WARS

WEARY as I was, the sleep in the sweet aired cavern was so refreshing that I woke before any sign of dawn had been able to penetrate the barrier of brushwood and faggots which screened the entrance. The candles had been extinguished, but I could see Abner sitting in the glow of the charcoal brazier, his head resting on his two bony hands, his elbows supported on his prominent knee caps. I looked beside me, where Sylvia lay, but could only dimly trace her form. I could, to my delight, hear her regular, even, soft breathing. God bless the brave girl. She slept as peacefully and soundly as ever she could have done at my old home at Soleby manor-house.

I saw no use in rising from my couch of blankets as yet, and lay there, with my eyes half open, watching the silent figure by the brazier. Presently I heard a slight rustling at the entrance, and saw Abner's hand steal to his hip pocket. But there came a whispered murmur. "'Phonse," I heard, and the little squat Breton came into the glow of the charcoal. The faggots which he had displaced in his entrance now permitted the grey light of early morning to filter through

into the cave. I could see that Alphonse was gesticulating eagerly, and that Abner's face was wreathed in a smile that stretched his generous mouth to a prodigious slit.

There was a susurrus of excited whispering, and as Alphonse continued more and more eagerly to narrate some matters to his master's ear the latter rose and showed his lath-like stature. Then he tossed his wide-brimmed hat in the air. It was not difficult to guess that Alphonse had brought good news. Well, it is never too early to hear that. I crept from my rugs and strode forward.

"Good for you, stranger," said Abner. "I reckon you've woke in the nick o' time. 'Phonse has friends and relations all round this darned blend of rock and morass, and he's been out on secret sarvice."

'Phonse was bowing and grinning all over his weatherbeaten face. "*Bo' jour, m'sieu, bo' jour*," said he. "Eet is good news. Vare good."

"Thar," said Abner, taking hold of the squat man by the shoulders and shaking him gently. "Jest you set down and recruit exhausted nater. I'll do the pervidin' of intelligence to our partner."

Nothing loth 'Phonse busied himself in preparing some warm food. The morning air struck chill and raw. I've no doubt he needed it.

"See hyar," said Abner. "I said you came by the Providence stage. Now's the fittest time for a skoot from this yer refuge as ever was. 'Phonse has brought all the news.

There's the makin's of an army at Le Mans, and a compatriot of mine with a name like Frieze is assemblin' a company of South American fighters, poncho lasso and all. That's the ticket for this warrior. I've got my old Mexican fit out all right and tight don't you hesitate to lay your bottom dollar, and 'Phonse is as pleased as a b'ar with a wild bees' nest at hearin' as these yer Bretons or Basks, or whatever they nomenclate themselves, are a gittin' up a ridgment all in the natyve caps and coats till they're a swellin' with patriotism and sour wine. Ole Gin'ral Polly" (? Polhés), "who cleared out of Orleans between two days 'cos he heerd as the Germans were within a hundred miles, has got the kick out from Gammybetta, and Gin'ral Reyan returned to that city of old reenown with all the pomp and panoply of war. Ther's a furrin legion formin' which you can swear you are makin' for; there's some real high-toned nusses who might be cryin' with waitin' for your lady sister (don't she sleep like a lamb, bless her pretty face?), so all she's got to do is to sew a red cross on a piece o' clean shirt and stick it on her arm, for which we secluded partiots in this yer grotto hev the materials. And, more than all that barge load, 'Phonse here has found up four hosses as can give greased lightnin' ten yards in the mile and beat it which can be bought for 300 francs (consarn the money what's that—sixty dollars, twelve pounds, eh?) each. I tell you, sir, that hosses is goin'



beggin'. What with the fear o' the French army borrowin' of 'em and forgittin' to bring 'em back, and of the Germans buyin' 'em without payin' for 'em, hosses is a drug in the stock market in Brittany and most other French States. Say? Do you feel like buyin' four first chop high flyin' racers for 240 dollars? I'll pay ye back the half when I kin, and bust me if I don't think I can 'arn the value in givin' ye a show round."

Nothing could have fallen out better. I congratulated myself on having had the forethought to bring more gold with me than was altogether comfortable to carry. For, in that wild part of Brittany, English notes would have been of little use. But I had plenty of good French Napoleons and notes of the Bank of France with which the Duc de Touraine had supplied me. And I was already confident that the £24 I was asked to pay for horses for Abner and the Basque would be more than earned by that capable and enthusiastic pair. I did not keep the American long in doubt, but, thrusting my hand in the great bag which I carried beneath my Inverness cape (a most useful article of clothing for concealing any burden!), I counted out seventy Napoleons and gave them to the little Breton without the slightest hesitation. "Get saddles and bridles and all that if you can," said I. "And don't forget one side saddle." His face lit up with delight, and, if I had not put on a somewhat forbidding aspect, I verily believe he

would have embraced me then and there. As it was he seized my hand and covered it with kisses, while I struggled and expostulated and Abner laughed in that dry, cackling laugh which he had.

"That's prime," said he. "Now, 'Phonse, jest you git, and fetch back them hosses, and as soon as the young lady have woke up and we've filled up those onpleasing vacuums in our interior Saratoga trunks with a good hot breakfast we'll venter forth with our cavalcade and make for inland. I reckon that by the time these yer Reepublican officials at Roche Bernard are awake enough to be spry we shall be in the leafy lanes and far enough to produce an excuse for our bein' where we are as furriners goin' to jine the army out of love of and sympathy with La Belle France. Which after all is pretty near the bull's eye onless I'm mistook in all of us."

"Yes," I replied, "For my part I give you my word that I have come over solely in the interests of France and the Empress. It will be no deception on my part to claim to be a friend of France. But there are reasons why neither my sister nor myself should be too closely interrogated by any damned republican fanatics. To them an Imperialist is worse than a German, and I verily believe that there are millions of Frenchmen who would rather see old William in Paris than the Empire reconstituted."

"I looks towards you," said Abner, "and drinks your health metaphorical, for you'll

never miss your man if you never point your gun wider than that. But I must interest myself in the culinary art while 'Phonse gets the hosses, or we shall waste time—which is as bad as wastin' old rye at such a moment of historical heft as this."

In our excitement and enthusiasm we had forgotten to keep our voices subdued, and while I was laughing at the American's quaint phrases I heard a sigh, and (forgive me, ye romanticists), a yawn from the recess where Sylvia was lying. We both turned to look, but the American, with the true delicacy which is more often found in his nation than is generally believed to be the case, quickly revolved on his heels so as to be back toward the recess in which I had taken my rest alongside my "sister."

"Good-morning," said Sylvia. "I wondered where I was at first."

Abner coughed. Then he whispered to me, "Don't you reckon as you and me had better take a pasear outside while the lady makes her toilet? I—I've got some women-kind over in the States, and I never knew 'em like to show up before they'd tidied their back hair and rubbed the sawdust out of their eyes."

That was characteristic of the man. Despite his quaint speech and rather uncouth appearance there was no more refined nature nor more delicate mind in the world than those of this man who had fought with the Mexican forces at a time when their cruelties and outrages were only equalled by those of the troops

under Bazaine's command. Much as I respected (though perhaps that is hardly the right word) Sylvia, intently as I thought of her, I'm not sure if I should have had the tenderness of insight into the girl's feelings which Abner showed. Of course he was right. Even if she had been my sister she would wish to smarten herself up before being inspected. But though I might not have thought of this first independently I never forgot Abner's lesson, and throughout our mission, whenever it was at all possible, I always remembered to leave the girl to herself for some minutes after she awoke.

I cried to her, "There's good news. We'll just have a look outside to see if 'Phonse is returning from the mission on which we have sent him and then we'll come back and tell you all about it."

"Thank you," said she, smiling prettily as we pushed through the brushwood at the doorway.

Then we stooped low while we burrowed through the tunnel which gave passage through the thicket of undergrowth outside. When we emerged and could stand upright the open air struck very cold after the warmth of our brazier-tempered cavern. Somewhere away ahead of the direction which we faced the sun was rising. But the thick white mist of the marshes along the river hung heavily around us and prevented us from seeing more than a few yards on any side. The eerie silence which ever broods on the wispy traces

of a morning haze held us mute. Beyond the rock in which the cavern was hollowed (a huge "bluff" of stone, looming up into the fog till its head disappeared in the sweeping film) came the discordant screaming of sea-gulls—a raucous music which but served to accentuate the stillness of the land about us. It was the very morning for the commencement of our adventures by land.

Presently (far in the distance as it seemed) there came a faint chink of metal on metal, and I saw Abner prick his ears, yes, and heard him sniff, like any dog accustomed to use the senses of hearing and of scent as mutual allies to warn him of the nature of any one or anything approaching.

"It's 'Phonse," said he. "He's hustled. Wal, so much the better. We kin stable the hosses under these poplars."

I looked up, and through the shifting warps of haze I saw the stately columns of close armed poplar trees stretching up their majestic stature into the dimness. A cucker of rising fowl betrayed the direction from which 'Phonse (if indeed it was the Breton) was coming, and, as the sound of the birds' wings shook the muffled air, the frightened snorts of more than one horse afforded additional testimony to the accuracy of Abner's divination of the identity of the person who drew nigh.

But before he appeared, I heard a call from the cavern, a call which merged in a phrase of smooth round song. "To France were returning two grenadiers," sang Sylvia, vocaliz-

ing the splendid opening bars of Schumann's dramatic song.

"Ah!" said Abner. "You be gittin' inside. I reckon your sister will be all the happier for a confab with you. Jest you shape out a route if ye can. I hain't got no map. Hev you?"

I assured him that I had a most excellent map, with roads and railways clearly designated, and with châteaux marked where we might expect hospitality and assistance.

"Good for you," said Abner. "Then go in quick and sudden and study that map along o' the lady. I don't doubt she've got brains enough to count how many beans make a quarter of a score. I'll wait here for 'Phonse."

I was in no way unwilling to return to the presence of my "mate," whom I found brighter than I had ever seen her, and so fair that my heart leapt to think that she and I were comrades, that she trusted me as utterly as ever woman trusted man.

"Isn't this lovely?" she cried, laughing. "No picnic was ever half such fun! I feel so well and fresh after my sleep in this cave. But it is difficult to remember that the business we are on is as serious as death." For a moment her voice fell, and her face clouded. But it was but a momentary mood. The next instant she was as merry as though she had not a care in the world.

"And what's the good news?" she cried. "I feel as if good news were the fitting accompaniment of my mood this morning. Quick,

Harry. Never be slow to bring your beautiful feet down from the mountains when you bring good tidings ! ”

I was charmed to see her so full of “ verve ” and happiness. “ Prepare yourself ! ” I cried melodramatically, so that she laughed more broadly, and delighted me further. “ Our host waits without, his worthy henchman is leading gallant steeds and palfreys for our service. E’en in the hours before dawn did he venture forth and find where such might be acquired at but a trifling cost. And moreover he heard tidings which are gladsome to every friend of France.” And with that I dropped my bombastic manner of speech and told my mate simply all that I had heard concerning the army at Le Mans, the state of affairs at Orléans, the enlistment of the foreign legion and the South American corps.

“ With any luck,” I concluded, “ we shall find the road clear or only held by French soldiers till we get to Orléans. Once there leave me to make way into le Château de Quatre Cheminées with you.”

“ But French soldiers may not be friends to us,” she cried.

“ Possibly,” said I. “ But they will be friends to what we pretend to be if we are wise,” I said. “ I do not propose to traverse the land labelled as an emissary of the Emperess. No. I am going to join the foreign legion, Abner to enrol himself in the South American corps, ’Phonse to become a comrade of the Basque regiment, and you, you, my

mate, must wear the Geneva cross, the red cross on a white ground, upon your rounded arm! How say you? Is it not well devised?"

"Ay, is it," replied she, imitating my assumed style of stilted speech. "Ay, is it. But when the time comes I will e'en whisper in thine ear the details of the hiding-place of the jewels lest I endanger thy safety by my presence at the chateau. How? Say I not well?"

"Well," said I. "So long as you've got rid of that ridiculous notion of yours that you were not going to come safely out of this business perhaps it might be as well for me to know exactly where to look. But the time for that is not yet. Behold, our host enters, followed by his trusty henchman. And begad, I've forgotten to look up the map and trace out a route as he asked me to do."

Abner came in rather hurriedly and at once set 'Phonse busy at the brazier. A savoury scent stole through the cavern. The keen brisk air had sharpened my appetite.

"We must be off p. d. q.," said Abner. "There's the hot place to pay at Roche Bernard. 'Phonse here has heard all about it. The boat which chased you last night spread reports that there were German spies or Imperial emissaries about, and as soon as the government authorities have woke right up and collected their matutinal offerings to exhausted nater in their bread bags I reckon there'll be a hue and cry about the morass. Come, 'Phonse. Quick. And you, my friend, hev you got the route" (he pronounced it rowt) "ready for yours obedient?"



"See here," I said, pointing to the map which the Duc de Touraine had given me. Sylvia bent forward and I felt her hair brush against my cheeks. The Yankee South American fighter crooked his staff of human stature in a sharp bend and brought his nose near the tracing.

"If we ride to the east, with the tiniest little south to it, we shall come to Angers, where we can take train to Le Mans or Orléans. So far as was known by those who should know there were no Germans west of Orléans when I left England——"

"There is none now, m'sieu," interrupted 'Phonse. "But there is a grand armée at Le Mans and anuzzer at Orléans."

"We'll chance it with the army," said I. "The only thing to decide now is whether to take train or not at Angers, and if we do take train whether to make for Le Mans or for Orléans direct."

"Say, stranger," drawled Abner. "Don't cut off more than you kin bite. East is our track. Thar I second the honorable proposer. But whether we take the cars or not or whether we confer the honour of our company on Orleans immejit or via Le Mans may be left to the dealer. I don't desiderate no prophetic mental machinations. Smart you may be stranger, and smart as I kin visualize as the lady is, we must be guided by sarcumstances. That's my idee. We start to ride to Anjers. If the dealer gives us a straight flush all the way wal and good. But if we

have to show our hands—well then we must see what card is most like to take the jack pot. We won't draw till we see how the bettin' goes."

I looked at Sylvia and saw that she approved of the views so quaintly stated by our friend. No doubt he was right. It was useless to formulate too much in advance. We must leave much, if not all, to chance. Well, hitherto fortune had favoured us in every way.

The breakfast was now ready, and very noble justice did all four of us do the delicious fried eels, the salmi of various wildfowl, the tench cooked in a chafing-dish with a little red wine, and the field fares which 'Phonse had been skilful enough to snare on the surrounding marshlands.

"May fortune go with us," said I, holding up my glass.

"For ever and ever amen," said Sylvia, a little irreverently but very charmingly.

"Once agin, stranger," said Abner, holding out his hand. "Put it there." We put it there.

"Now I reckon we must git," said Abner, and in a moment he and 'Phonse were busied in packing up their *impedimenta*.

I snatched up my few belongings and Sylvia's bag and led her through the tunnel of switches and twigs to the poplars where the horses were tethered. A moment's keen look round satisfied us that there was no human being in sight. It was well. We went up to the horses and examined them while we waited for Abner and the Breton.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A FIGHT IN A FOREST

THERE could be no doubt that the horses were bargains. Two were about three-quarter blood, the other quarter being the strong Normandy grey, and one, not more than thirteen hands, was as pure and pretty an Arab mare as ever a lady rode. This last carried the side saddle which 'Phonse had been able to get. The fourth horse was meaner to look at, being a lean, rough and dirty-coated beast of about fourteen hands, with a white nose which looked unwashed, withers scarce higher than the saddle back, hooves as large as a cart horse's (with ragged tufts of hair streaming from the pasterns), and wicked mischievous eyes that always seemed to be mocking the observer. As Sylvia and I inspected each animal with care (and I could tell by the way in which she handled them that she loved horses as well as I did and knew as much about them) that rough shabby-looking brute cocked his eye at me and winked, as though to say: "Lord, here's a game to see the likes of me in the company of these here swells!" What especially irritated me about the brute was that he seemed to discover a kindred spirit in

me and to direct all his mocking confidences in my direction. It was as though he said: "Lor! You and I know. Don't we? Lor, what fools these mortals be!" And I had no desire to be classed with that shameful-looking steed even in its own mind. So I ignored it, snubbed it in fact; and then I really thought it would go into fits of laughter, so humorously did it curl its lips, so mockingly did it grin and wink at me.

But Sylvia could scarce turn her attention to anything else but the Arab mare which was evidently meant for her. She petted it and caressed it, and the mare nuzzled its mouth in her hand and kissed her—a charming picture, and, when I remembered that I was in the position of a brother or comrade only to Sylvia, not in the least tantalizing.

I had made my choice of the iron greys, and had got the length of the stirrups right on the horse that had taken my fancy by the mild beauty of his eyes. There was but little to choose between them in their strength, their apparent capability of speed, and their grace of movement. The mighty quarters of each were rounded and full, the rumps flowing into the hocks in sweet muscular lines, while from the knee downward the bones were at once delicately shaped and strong. The bellies of both were well hooped up, the bodies not too long, while the withers rose in front of the saddles till a rider had something before him to encourage him to trust to his horse going down the steepest declivity.

The heads were small, the necks finely curved and poised, the eyes large and soft. Each was "aged." It was a blow in the face of an Englishman to see two such perfect hacks in Brittany.

We had scarcely finished our examination of the mouths when Abner and 'Phonse emerged from the tunnel through the thicket. For a moment I was inclined to laugh. Then I checked myself. After all why was the Mexican uniform more absurd than the costume of the average Englishman abroad.

Abner was garbed in the wide-mouthed trousers with which Buffalo Bill has in later years made London acquainted. His great coat was nothing more or less than a South American "poncho." His heels bore spurs with huge rowels, beneath his poncho could be seen his finely decorated under-coat. On his head he wore the imitation sombrero, so good an imitation as to be scarce distinguishable from that of the old world Spain. He held the "bight" of his lasso, the greater portion of which was coiled round his neck.

Alphonse had donned the most popular uniform of a *franc-tireur*, and wore the thick woollen blouse, of navy blue, and a berêt out of compliment to the Basques of the lower part of the Bay. They were a notable couple, and no one looking at them could doubt for a moment that they were bound to join that extraordinary medley of races and uniforms which was forming on the banks of the Loire. As for me I wore my ordinary shooting cos-

tume, and doubted not that with that I should do very well for the foreign legion.

Abner bore in his hand a square of white linen in the centre of which a red cross had been stitched.

As he emerged from the tunnel he held this aloft and cried out to Sylvia, "I reckon all on us forgot thisyer, miss. If you'll extend your gracious pardon in the direction of the subscriber, I'll sew it on for ye."

I was annoyed that I had forgotten to see this safety mark affixed to the girl who was under my charge. Besides what right had I to let my thoughts dwell upon her charms and beauty so much that I had forgotten the most obvious precaution to insure her safety. Abner had been the first to think of the device. Surely I might have remembered to see it carried out.

But one thing was a comfort. I could not be jealous of Abner.

Sylvia thanked him prettily, and, smiling at the adroitness of a man about work which is supposed to belong peculiarly to women, held her arm out while he sewed on the cross.

With careful precision Abner drew the thread tight again and again and finished his task by biting it. Then, with intense earnestness, he inspected the saddles upon the iron greys. "No pommel for the lasso," said he. "I shall have to make one! Hev ye made yer choice?" he asked me, as he stood back looking at the trappings with a sneer. "Hev ye made yer choice o' hosses, mister?"

I pointed out that I had already strapped my belongings to the hinder part of the saddle of the horse which I had chosen, and with a nod of comprehension, Abner hoisted a bundle of rugs on to the back of the other iron grey and made it fast by means of some cord.

Then, with great solemnity, he produced from the capacious pockets of his under-coat a couple of formidable looking revolvers. "Air you heeled?" he asked. "If not, I reckon both you and the lady would be the better for one o' theseyer little guns."

Now although I had a pistol I did not possess a genuine American revolver, and I accepted his offer of one eagerly. He pressed the other on Sylvia, who took it without reluctance, and then he handed each of us a box of cartridges. "You never know when you'll want a gun," said he. "But now you're heeled. Come, 'Phonse, mount your fiery broncho," he added to the Breton. "Lord, 'Phonse, what a picter of a hoss you ha' chose for yourself." He burst into his sniggering laugh. But 'Phonse smiled drily. "Vait an' see, m'sieu," said he. "This is the horse of my country. He can run, ah! More as you think."

He sprang into his saddle, and the little ugly cob at once seemed strung to concert pitch and all on wires to get away. I gave Sylvia a hand, and the dear girl sprang up as readily and gracefully as if her walking skirt had been made for a riding habit. I mounted leisurely, a little inconvenienced by the load

over the crupper, and then Abner, with one gaunt spring, leapt astride his horse.

The sun had now dissipated much of the mist and we could see a road running from west to east but a few yards ahead of us.

"I reckon you'd best set the course for this squadron," said Abner. I gave a glance at my pocket compass, and then pointed to the road ahead. Sylvia ranged up alongside and Abner and 'Phonse drew level behind us. We trotted quickly to the road and turned to the right.

As the day crept on we drew clear of both marsh atmosphere and pasture land. The rough, unfertile land of Brittany rose before us, with all its stony eminences, its wild growths and thickets its poorly tilled fields of poor soil. And now that we could see as far as the nature of the scenery permitted us we seemed to have come to a veritable land of desolation. Here and there a few women and children were distinguishable, gathering stones, trimming brushwood, even striding behind the primitive one-horse ploughs. But the absence of man was remarkable. More than anything we had seen yet did it bring home to us the fact that we were in a land whose every adult male was needed for repulsing the invader. The sorry villages through which we passed contained no human beings fit for war. Old men, women, and babes stared at us, and when we made signs that we were going to join the army they did their best to work up a little enthusiasm. But they put no heart into it.



They were thinking of the men at the front, of the wasted fertility of central and Eastern France, of the terror which had come upon them even away on the borders of the Bay of Biscay.

For long we rode in silence. The dismal solemnity of the scene struck speech from our lips. At length we began to approach some wooded hills, and here we found a fiercer savagery of humanity, and a keener knowledge of the meaning of war. Here first we passed a band of uncouth men, clad, like 'Phonse, in the woollen blouse of the *francs-tireurs*, with belts about their waists, in which were thrust formidable looking knives, and with old flint-locks or percussion-cap fowling pieces slung at their backs or carried on their shoulders. Many of these were Breton poachers, who were now intent on poaching greater game than fowl or fish. Many of them were to fight with a valour worthy of the *grande armée* of former days, and many were to perpetrate such horrors as almost to justify the Germans in the terrible revenge they took.

The first two or three of these groups which we passed (for all were making to the east, bound for Le Mans) wished us God speed heartily enough. Especially did they hail the appearance of Abner with enthusiasm, for already the strange qualities of the South American Corps were becoming famous—their gallantry, their courage, their adroitness in throwing the lasso so as to bring down any horse at a gallop who should venture within

the radius of their throw, all won the admiration of the picturesque-loving Frenchmen.

But, as we drew to higher land, and came amongst the vineyards (in which the want of male labour had protracted the vintage so late that it was not yet entirely over), we found a less admirable class of men making their way but slowly towards the east where fighting was. More than once a good farmer's wife or old grandfe'r warned us that there were hawks abroad, and that many of those who pretended to be marching to the army were but brigands who took advantage of their numbers and their arms to swill the rough wine without paying for it and to rob the poor peasants of the food which was more valuable than wine—for the great demand for supplies of all kinds had made itself felt in every corner of France.

At a pretty little farmhouse which stood amidst its vines on the edge of a wood on the uplands the good wife was especially earnest in her manner. No one of us but Alphonse could understand a word of what she said, but she gesticulated with such powers of pantomime that we made out, almost as easily as the native of the country, that there was a large band of villainous scoundrels but a little way ahead. The good woman raised her hands and evoked blessings on Sylvia, and even we could understand a little of the quaintly pronounced Latin in which she prayed to the Virgin to protect the girl she blessed. It was both pretty and touching to see

this one woman's care for another, and, while she prayed and warned, her household, or what was left of it, stood round and gesticulated in support of her. Clearly there was a danger beyond the ordinary to be faced, and clearly we should express our fervent gratitude to this good dame for the interest she showed in each and all of us. She insisted on our halting for a space and regaling ourselves on some fat thrushes ("Ah! The rascals, they've got fat on my grapes!" Alphonse told us she cried merrily) and a still white wine which resembled still champagne but was far more alcoholic. Alphonse translated her words and told us that her soil was not unlike that of Saumur, but that the wine it grew was exceptionally powerful. Certainly it warmed us, and cheered us, and we felt all the better both for the generous provision of the delicious birds, the fragrant cheese, and the wine. We tried to press some money on our good hostess but she refused with every symptom of genuine distress. One thing only she asked. A kiss from Sylvia. It seemed (according to Alphonse) that she had lost a sister of whom my mate reminded her, and that it was to that fortunate fact that we owed much of her solicitude. For it cannot be denied that it was to her insistence, her pressing warning of danger, that we rode on more prepared for sudden hostility than we should otherwise have been. Abner's lips were set tight, and his eyes glowed like the charcoal in his brazier at the cavern when we

entered the dark and uneven way through the thickest part of the woods. He touched me (riding up from the rear to do so from behind) and showed me silently that he had removed two revolvers from his pockets and was carrying one ready in his hand and the other in his coat pocket where he could reach it in a moment. I felt my pistol and got both that and the revolver with which I had been furnished ready. But I do not think that I realized that we might be compelled to use our weapons in self-defence. As for Alphonse he was eager to ride ahead (for the little fellow was as full of courage as those thrushes must have been of grapes) and peer with his keen eyes into every stretch of shadow or thick undergrowth. Sylvia alone seemed undisturbed by the good farm body's warnings. She chatted and smiled as sweetly as ever. The sound of her laugh sounded eerie and unnatural in the woods.

But soon a sense of approaching danger fell on us, even, I think, on Sylvia, for we were riding up a steep ascent between great trunks of pine, the bases of which were hidden six and seven feet high by the rank undergrowth of summer, now dying and becoming brittle as its colours ripened to the tints of autumn. I looked at the girl riding beside me and noticed that her face had paled, and that her eyes had a feverish expectant glitter. Suddenly, about twenty yards ahead of us, half a dozen rough-looking men sprang out from the cover of the woods into the roadway. They all wore the woollen blouse which had become

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ated with the *francs-tireurs*, but the rest  
 their apparel varied considerably. One  
 high-crowned Norman hat, another a  
 ade of rabbit skins, a third nothing on  
 d but a kerchief tied round his fore-  
 All carried knives, but only three  
 l to be provided with firearms. These  
 clumsy old-fashioned muzzle loaders  
 els like a bit of gas pipe, and they  
 swiwdly weapons with a fierce  
 tomime.

cried out one of the rascals,  
 his accent.

I that we were friends of France,  
 and But my words only brought a  
 yel from the men who opposed our  
 pas, and now a noise in the rear  
 cau, and now a noise in the rear  
 And ace round and look behind.  
 behi ragamuffins had leapt out  
 locks were only two sorry flint-  
 what so far as I could see, but  
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than a minute he had returned and remounted, and we were off again.

Sylvia was pale as death and looked as though the horror of the thing had been too much, not for her courage, but for her nerves.

"Oh!" she murmured to me, now that we were again riding together in front of the others. "Oh! Did you see it?"

"Hush, hush," I said. "He deserved his fate, and we must not dwell upon the manner of it."

But though she recovered her colour and bravery of carriage, she was very silent and thoughtful for some hours after our escape.

As for me I admit that I felt a bit of an ass. I had always prided myself on my readiness. But the boxing and rough and tumble fighting to which I had been accustomed was but poor training for this relentlessness of speed to kill which Abner had shown. While I had been preparing, getting ready to kill, he had shot five men dead and lassoed a sixth. Even 'Phonse, whom I had hitherto been inclined to regard with a good-natured contempt, had effected more than I and killed his man. But the superb coolness and readiness of the Mexican fighter had been a lesson to me. When it came to a question of killing the battle was to the swift, the relentless. Abner had engaged like an old soldier; I like a country volunteer at a sham fight. I felt ashamed, and I fancy I showed it. Presently I felt Sylvia's hand (that hand which was becoming the tuning fork of the gamut of her emotion) touch me. "I'm so glad you did not kill any one,"

she whispered. "Oh! I shall never forget that horrible lasso; I shall never get the sound of those awful bumps and thuds behind us out of my mind. God forgive us."

But though I had not appeared in very brilliant colours during the encounter the deaths of those villains sat lightly on my conscience. I regretted that I had not had more hand in them. And soon I soothed my "mate," and showed her that it was their death or ours; that they were unmitigated ruffians, a danger to the countryside, whereas we were bound on a mission which might mean all for France.

For the first time since the fight Sylvia turned to Abner, and reined her horse into a walk, an example which we all followed. The girl held out her hand with a gallant gesture of frank admiration. "I thank you, Mr. Tin-gey," said she. "You have saved my life and honour and have done more for the Em-press than you are aware of. She will thank you herself when she knows."

Abner's weather-stained face grew of a still deeper tint. For some reason or other, possibly connected with his nationality, he seemed to hold the Imperial pair in a reverence little short of worship.

"I reckon t'worn't much as I did, miss," said he. "The critters had no guns fit for a dime show, and if they had they couldn't use 'em. But theseyer guns are Colt's latest pattern and 'll kill an elephant inside o' ten seconds if ye hit him right. No. I don't take

no stock along o' the shootin', but"—and here he smiled with a kind of tender recollection—"seein' as my little toy here" (he waved his deadly lasso) "hadn't got nothin' to fix on-tew, I won't deny as that was a pretty throw. And 'Phonse here he stuck his man like a reg'ler natyve greaser. Good on ye, 'Phonse! You'll be handier with yer weapon next time I'm thinking," he said to me, while Sylvia shuddered to see him swing his lasso backwards and forwards with an easy grace. "Never wait till you are filled up with lead before you start to shoot. I see you gittin' out your gun. But Jeerusalem! There's boys out West as would ha' printed the six o' spades on your chest while you were thinkin' when you'd pull the trigger. However that may be, I reckon you'll come on with a bit more practyse, and as soon as we git through these derved woods I reckon I'll learn you a trick or two."

Even as he spoke we came to the first signs of the end of the forest. A little straggling village appeared, and we could see that where it ended was but a short distance from open country.

"I don't know what's your opinion of the sitiuation," said Abner. "But that little brisk exercise has given me a twist enough to eat biled bean pods. Them grape eaters worn't food for a hungry man. Here, 'Phonse. See what you can find at that 'oburge' as the natyves call an inn."

I had no hunger, neither had Sylvia, but we should both be better for a draught of wine. We all pulled up against the inn.



## CHAPTER XIV

### ORLÉANS

WHEN we had recruited ourselves in the respective ways which seemed convenient for us, we remained seated in the rough room of the inn while we discussed our future movements. Our horses were regaled with a good feed of oats which 'Phonse managed to obtain by the use of his native Breton tongue, but which had been refused to the French of Sylvia and myself. We had now made nearly twenty miles, and were not far from the little town of Savenay. But it was plain that if we determined to make for Angers we should not be able to reach that junction of railway lines until late on the following day. And the hostess of the inn had told us of stirring things afoot. Doubtless she spoke with but little authority; but she had a son in the new formed army of the Loire, and he managed to get news through to her which put her in a position of intelligence which justified us in regarding her words with some earnestness. According to her the Prussians between Paris and Orléans were on the point of being annihilated. The plains of La Beauce, that fertile district immediately to the north of the forest of Orléans, was about to become the scene of one of the

greatest combats of the war, and Orléans would be involved, as it was now occupied by a courageous and energetic general of a very different stamp from the Polhés who had marched out bag and baggage at a mere rumour of the proximity of the enemy. And the business of Sylvia and myself took us to the Château de Quatre Cheminées which lay in the village of St. Jean de Ruelle, a few miles to the north of Orléans. Who could say what might happen to the chateau if it became the centre of a battlefield. What hiding-place could conceal the jewels if the walls of the old chateau were to be hammered at by shot and shell from both combatants? It seemed of vital importance, at any rate to Sylvia and myself, to get to Orléans as quickly as possible and to make our entry into the chateau before the serried ranks of the opposing armies met in the ultimate struggle in its neighbourhood.

And Abner desired to be where the fighting was. 'Phonse cared little where he was so that he was with Abner. Therefore we were all agreed to get to Orléans with as little delay as might be. And to do that, we were informed by our hostess, and by 'Phonse (who was an admirable guide, as he remembered every lane and byway from his youth), that we must draw a little further to the south and take the train at Nantes. By this means we ought to reach Orléans late that night or early on the morrow. This decided us, and, after we had paid the score (which astounded

us by its moderation), we took the bypaths and bridle ways which afforded us short cuts to the town whence brandy once took its name.

We came to the quaint port at the mouth of the Loire with some regret that we had not made for the Loire rather than the Villaine. But we were soon satisfied that, had we done so, we should have experienced great difficulty in landing without being subjected to a strict examination and search. For Nantes was full of self-importance, and its municipal authorities were strengthened by the crews of three small war vessels which hung on and off the entrance to the mouth of the river. As it was we rode in in gallant array, and on declaring that our wish was to join the army of the Loire at Orléans we were cheered, and might have been fêted till whatever battles were imminent in La Beauce had all been well decided. As good luck would have it a number of horses were being sent from the neighbourhood to the army and there was no dearth of horse boxes at the railway station. We easily secured comfortable space for our steeds and arranged to accompany them by a train that would get us into Orléans before daybreak. Somehow the fact of our having ridden in satisfied all the authorities, whether municipal or military, and I could not but think, a little sadly, how easily it would be for German spies to make their way all about the provinces if strangers were permitted such free-

doms as were offered to us. For though we were indeed on a friendly mission to France, yet we were not what we pretended to be, and if we could pass through secure from suspicion by reason of our pretences, it would be just as easy for any secret service emissaries of the enemy to do likewise. But it was always so all over France. Not the slightest caution was observed, not the slightest trouble taken to learn about the enemies' movements or to conceal those of the French. It would seem indeed that the gods had it in mind to destroy not only the Empire but the nation, and had thrown a veil of insane negligence over all. Of what use was the gallantry of the men in the ranks when those others were so culpably careless? Well. It was all the more necessary to push on to Orléans as quickly as possible, for every experience taught us that so far as any hopes of ultimate victory was concerned the war was over for France already, unless—unless Sylvia and I were able to bribe Bazaine to use his real genius against the enemy instead of solely for his own purposes. Ah! If only he would lead the magnificent troops which he had cooped up under the walls of Metz out and use them as he knew how. If only he would bring to bear the genius for strategy which he undoubtedly possessed, and would earn the Empress's bribe by honest endeavour in the cause of France. Then, indeed, the German thousands (and there were some 700,000 Germans on French territory at the

time) might be forced back against the frontier for fear of being cut off and destroyed. The fate of France seemed to lie in our hands. Would God permit us to be His humble instruments in saving her. I did not know at the time that we were after all mere agents for a capitalist, and that Dumergue had backed the mission because he had bought French stock for a rise. Perhaps it was that which worked against us when we came to the real issue. But that is to anticipate. When we left Nantes we did so with high hearts and full of enthusiasm for France and for the Empress.

It was late at night before our train steamed out of Nantes, and all of us had taken advantage of the rest at the port to obtain as much sleep as we could—for the pressure of our affairs forbade us to rely on the chances of regular hours of rest. Particularly had I rejoiced at the chance a decent hotel in the town gave Sylvia for the privacy which must have been so agreeable to her womanhood, and the loss of which must have been her greatest trial throughout those days and nights when she could not safely separate herself from me.

Eager as we were to find aught admirable in the conduct of French affairs, we could not be blind to the inexpressible confusion which reigned at the railway station. We were not the only ones going to the front. There were a number of the *garde mobile*, of *francs-tireurs* (more worthy than the

ruffians with whom we had fought in the forest, but apparently less capable), and here and there an odd volunteer for either the foreign legion or for one of the many *outrè* corps which formed the most picturesque and the hardest fighting contingent of the army of the Loire.

But most of our fellow travellers were French, and treated us with French courtesy. Finding that we preferred to be left to ourselves, and, doubtless, influenced by the respect which the nurse's Geneva cross invariably meets with in an army on active service, we were permitted to occupy a compartment to ourselves, though much of the train was overcrowded, owing to the want of forethought on the part of the railway authorities.

The noise of singing, which became audible before the train started, was soon drowned in the greater tumult of steam and friction. None of us felt disposed for conversation, and it was useless to endeavour to formulate any plans before we knew how matters stood at Orléans. Our route did not take us through Le Mans but past Tours and Blois, and at neither of these famous towns did there seem to be any great excitement as we drew up at their platforms for a few moments. At each of them a few recruits for the army got in, many of them unhappily, too stimulated by their libations to be aught more than a senseless drunken mob. There seemed a slackness, a want of discipline, in the very

manner and walk of those wearing uniform. The foreign legion contingent formed a contrast with the native soldiers which was as deplorable from the French point of view as it was gratifying to the three Anglo-Saxons in our carriage—for most of the gallant foreign legion consisted of English and Americans.

As we drew near Orléans a few camp fires shone near the railway, and at Beaugency (according to 'Phonse) there seemed to be a considerable body of troops. I could not but recollect, as we ran into Orléans, that if the battle which was expected for the morrow took place to the north of the town in the Beauce, it would be fought on the ground of the victory of Jeanne d'Arc over Sir John Fastolf, whose tomb I had seen in St. Nicholas Church at Yarmouth, and the thought made me feel more at home than I should have deemed possible. In the Beauce the French had given the English invaders a terrible beating. Would history repeat itself when the army of the Loire attacked the Prussians on the morrow, or rather on that very day, for the great clock of Orléans had struck midnight before we detrained.

The desolation, the lifelessness of the sleeping country through which we had passed, made the stir and fret of Orléans the more noticeable by us. So confused was everything at the station that we took our horses from their boxes ourselves and led them out into the street without molestation. Every-

where there were throngs of citizens and soldiers standing under the lights of the streets, or sitting outside the cafes (which were all aflame with lights and which, I believe, did not close at all on that memorable night), discussing the imminent struggle. There were flamboyant civilians who were boasting that General Reyan would repeat his victory of the sixth October (now five days past) and drive Von der Tann and his Bavarians to the east till they met Bazaine, who would annihilate what was left of them. There were others, both civilian and military, who inveighed against the interference of Gambetta and his party with military affairs, and who predicted a terrible defeat owing to the action taken by the republican leaders. There were men wearing the garb of the line who seemed so sunk in sloth and indifference that they recked of naught but to fill themselves with food and wine. At one moment General Reyan was mentioned as the future saviour of the country; at another he was ridiculed and all hope was declared to rest in General de la Motte Rouge, now the commander-in-chief of the army of the Loire. There were others who said that there was little chance of the proper army of the Loire being engaged, for it seemed impossible for a French general to handle more than fifteen thousand troops or so without making some dreadful blunder. Everywhere was uncertainty, indecision and confusion. We heard how General Longuerue had been surprised



on the previous day at Artenay (and I thought of the Count!) and been driven with his rout of troops into the forest to the north of the town, and the next moment we were assured that this was merely a clever piece of strategy to lure Von der Tann to the strongholds of the forest which the French troops occupied in expectation of an attack as soon as the sun about to rise showed himself above the horizon. In the medley of untrustworthy intelligence, of swollen hopes and cowardly despair, there seemed but one thing clear to us. That there would be a pitched battle on the morrow, and that it would be in the forest which ran as far as the Château de Quatre Cheminées, which we must endeavour to reach before it became the centre of attack or defence—for my map proved to me that in the event of a French defeat (which, alas! seemed only too probable) the fight would drag back in the direction of Orléans so as to involve not only the château, but the whole village of St. Jean de Ruelle.

There was no time for rest. We must e'en push on over the northern bridge to which Alphonse led us. The cannon had been heard in the town on the previous day. God alone knew if only the sound would reach the city in the coming fight, or if the shells themselves would fall in the narrow old streets.

But it was no easy task to get out of the city. What with troops pouring out and disbanded men straggling in, the streets and

roads were all but impassable. I had suggested to Abner that he and his henchman should leave us to press forward on our mission (which I could not disclose to him even then) while he endeavoured to get regularly enrolled in the South American Corps. But he pooh-poohed the notion. "I guess not," said he. "Your way's mine. You're goin' to the front and I reckon it's in the front that the South American Corps is to be found. Eh, 'Phonse? How do you cast your vote? Air you eager to jine the frank tirsers, or will ye keep with our friends here?"

"I watch m'mselle," said 'Phonse, with a bow and a light in his eyes there was no misunderstanding. He too had fallen thrall to Sylvia's charm. Verily she was the mascotte of the enterprise, and without her help no one would have stood a chance of success.

But, before we pushed through the rabble out over the bridge, I did my utmost to persuade her to remain in the city and to let me go on the quest of the jewels accompanied by the American alone. She had given me full directions by this time as to the whereabouts of the jewels, and I thought I could find them without her aid. But she would not listen to me. "Where you go, I go," said she. "You undertook this venture at my instigation. Would you have me show myself a dastard to leave you to carry it out alone?" Her eyes filled with tears, but they were tears of heroism and not of grief. Now, in this supreme moment, when we

could not doubt that in a few short hours we should be in the midst of the horrors of modern warfare, she pressed close to me, and the mere energy of her presence filled me with determination and courage. Well, if I were indeed pledged to do my best for France and the Empress, I could not deny that the presence of this stout-hearted girl might encourage me to do deeds of which I should be incapable in her absence. Moreover, what was the use of endeavouring to persuade her when her mind was firm and made up?

We crossed the bridge over the Loire just as the scent of approaching dawn came to our nostrils. There was need for haste. Even as we made our way towards the most southern houses of St. Jean de Ruelle, a faint grey light struck the sky to our right with a chill warning of coming day. The forest ahead of us loomed dark and threatening. We knew it was full of troops. Before we were actually in the village there came the boom of a big gun from far away to the north. The battle was begun.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE CHÂTEAU

THE village of St. Jean de Ruelle is rather a long straggling suburb of the city than an old-fashioned Touraine rural community, and it was through it that our way lay to the château in which the Empress's jewels had been hidden. To the north and north-east lay the forest of Orléans, while to the west and north of the forest is the rich corn land of La Beauce. The German attack was as yet between twenty and ten miles in the direction of Artenay, on the road to Paris, and between the city and the German advance were ranged the French. As we rode through the long white street of the suburb the sun rose well above the horizon and permitted us to look about us and to see the nature of our whereabouts. The suburb was like most suburbs on the borders of an old city; that is to say, was a mixture of modern buildings and of old-fashioned cottages and farmhouses. As yet the streets were empty and a great peace seemed to brood over the white dwellings with their neat little gardens and their prim window curtains and ornaments. Far ahead was the purple-grey opacity of the forest, with gleams of the golden and russet tints of autumn where the light was strong enough to give the colours their real value.

One or two old men were clattering their sabots in the road, but there was nothing to show that the dogs of war were unleashed and would soon be raging and ravening till the serenity of this fair country was a horrible hotchpotch of blood and fire. The October morning was grey and cold. Heavy clouds hung listlessly, waiting for the shock of artillery to dissolve them. The troops hidden in the forest and stretching (as we learnt afterwards) from Chevilly nearly to St. Jean were cleverly concealed. Only away, ahead, the roar of the cannon began to grow incessant.

We pressed on, eager to get to the château before it was occupied by the troops of either belligerents, and, a few hundred yards beyond the village church (which stood almost at the end of the suburb), Sylvia pointed to a pair of old iron gates which were open, giving entrance to a short drive between fine old birch, larch and elm trees to one of the gabled mansions which are scattered about La Beauce and its neighbourhood. It was the Château de Quatre Cheminées, and the four chimneys, or rather the four huge stacks of chimneys, thrust their land-marks high above the lopped trees which had been shortened against the house for the sake of light. Alas ! No smoke now issued from the chimneys, and even from the road we could see that the château was held by a strong force of the *garde mobile*.

Just then a rattle of musketry burst out

from the woods not more than two miles ahead. Unless Sylvia were to be subjected to the risks of an engagement we had come far enough to the north. Moreover, if we could find some excuse for stopping at the château it would be our best course to stay there in the hopes that we might be left alone during the day for a space of time sufficient to enable us to obtain the jewels from their hiding-place.

Abner could scarce be persuaded to stay with us. The sound of the small-arm fighting had stirred his blood with recollections of his old campaigns in Mexico, campaigns in which he fought against the nation we were now trying to help. As for 'Phonse, his breath was coming harsh and raucous. It was he who first turned in up the drive and, riding swiftly to the sentries posted at the main entrance of the château, demanded to be supplied with chassépôt and ammunition. He had shown us how to remain at the château. Though General La Motte Rouge must have had nearly 60,000 men under his command, the trouncing he had received on the previous day had shaken the nerve of many of the troops, and they were only too eager to welcome anything in the shape of a volunteer.

We all rode in and demanded to see the officer in command of the detachment. This proved to be a Captain Moreau, one of the few who had endeavoured to stay the rout at Woerth and on finding that this was impos-

sible effected his escape, and was now fighting bravely and skilfully with the army in which the hopes of France were reposed, more, even, than in the superb battalions under the walls of Metz.

Captain Moreau stepped briskly out on to the drive and saluted, bowing to Sylvia with a brave Frenchman's courtesy. In brief terms I explained that we had come to offer our services (there seemed to be no other course to take), and that I should be glad if he would inform me how I could be of the most use.

"Ah, m'sieur," said he, "it is very easy for me to tell you that. We are so disorganized, so undisciplined, that there is no need for you to get yourself formally enrolled. We have our orders to remain here till we are summoned to the front, and we are none too many. But I must warn you, m'sieur, that if the enemy capture you with marks of fighting about you you will have but short shrift. The villains will hang you unless you wear the uniform of some recognized corps. Ah!" he cried, looking at Abner, "m'sieur your friend is already of the corps of South Americans, and this brave fellow has something of the Basque uniform about him which might protect him—though I doubt it. As for you, m'nselle," he said, "your cross of honour is welcomed by both friend and foe alike, and we have no ambulance with us. If you can bear the horrors of the wounded, ah! My men would regard you as a saint. Poor

fellows! They will fight to the death. But it is hard to feel that their death will not bring relief to our afflicted land!"

We dismounted and the captain detailed two of his men to stable our horses in the ample buildings at the back of the château.

Then he led the way in, apologizing for going first, but excusing himself on the ground of expediency.

The great hall of the château was of the thirteenth century as far as I could judge, and was roofed over and supported by magnificent old oak beams. A panelling of some dark wood, walnut or old oak, ran round the walls, and there was a handsome carved balustrade around the stairway leading to the private apartments. The windows had all been broken and mattresses and furniture piled against them, where possible, so that they formed a strong defensive position with loopholes for the defending force to fire through. Again the French were on the defensive, they whose genius lay especially in attack.

The captain offered us wine and bread, the only refreshment there was in the château which had been abandoned when general Reyau fled from the city at the end of September. Then he begged me to wear some distinctive uniform which might proclaim me as one of the regular army in the event of my falling into the hands of the enemy. But I refused. I told him I had heard that there was a foreign legion who dressed how



they chose, and that I considered myself one of these. "Ah, sir," said he mournfully, "and it will be a pity if any of those brave foreign soldiers get captured by the enemy, for they will be hanged without a doubt."

Now the prospect of being hanged was not particularly pleasant. But I had no intention of permitting myself to be captured, so I remained firm, and continued in my rough shooting suit.

There were about a hundred men in the château itself and the woods about it were held by another hundred. When the captain had done all he could to welcome us he took us round the positions and pointed out the strong places and the weak. He furnished Abner and myself with chassepôts, and sent off 'Phonse with the one he had already secured to use his keen Breton eyes in the lookout chamber at the top of the tower which stood in the north wing of the château. Then we descended again to the hall.

From the entrance we could see the roadway leading from St. Jean de Ruelle to the front, and now there were sounds and sights of troops hurrying forward to the firing line. Captain Moreau seemed fidgety and uneasy. "Let us," said he, "let us watch the advance from Orléans. These are the reserves and the strange corps which exercise the privilege of going where they will provided they fight hard and well—as they always do."

We walked out, the captain in front and Sylvia between Abner and myself, and stood

against the iron gates. It was a curious sight. Now two or three companies of ragged regulars slouched along, apparently reluctant to carry their tender skins within rifle shot. Then came a metallic clang, which made us all start, and the captain smile.

"Ah!" said he. "Here are the Arabs—the Spahis!" A magnificent body of men, nearly 600 strong, rode past at a walk. The fierce dark faces of the Mamelukes were surmounted with the turbans of their native land, they sat high on their curious Moorish saddles, their curved scimitars hung picturesquely by their sides. Many of them carried lances, some those long unwieldy brass-mounted firelocks which look so martial but are of so little practical value in modern warfare. Each man bore himself as a king or one of a line of kings. Never did a more barbaric force go into action, not even in the days of the Crusades. As they were filing past us again the Eastern clarions clanged out their brazen message. The horses broke into a trot, and jingling and jangling the Arabs passed into the forest on their way to the firing line. Then came a still more extraordinary corps. "Look!" said our friend the captain. "These are the '*Gers*.' They never speak. But they are picked fighters and terrible in action." A small troop of fifty men rode into sight. Their uniform was black, with skull and cross-bone facings. They wore black masks through which their eyes peered without the faintest expression. Like

sombre statues they rode on their way. They were all picked men, picked shots, reckless in courage. That could be learnt by their actions. But who they were or why they chose that weird costume no one knew then or knows now. The captain and we two other men saluted. The leader of this piratically clad corps did likewise. In dead silence the fifty rode past. In dead silence they disappeared into the woods.

"Where is the foreign legion?" I whispered to the captain.

"Oh!" said he, with a laugh. "They're sure to be at it already. They are mostly young Englishmen and Irishmen with a sprinkling of Americans, and when there's any fighting they're always in the midst of it. If the fight comes this way you'll see them. But," he added courteously, "I hope that you are not thinking of joining them so long as I hold this château."

He was speaking when an exclamation burst from Abner. About two hundred cavalry came swinging along at a canter. These all wore the poncho, and carried lassoes at their saddle bows. Each man wore two revolvers, and had a Remington repeater slung at his back. "I reckon," said Abner, "as I'll jine them fightin' men. They're my sort; and, yes! there's old Elihu Potter, my sergeant under Juarez. I'll take a fond farewell, captain," said he. "These are my people and I reckon I'm bound to go with them."

He shouted out and three or four of the

troop greeted him with great heartiness. Presently he was "hand on bridle" of a horse which was brought up from the rear of the troop and had the usual "fittings" for the lassoes on which the troop prided itself especially.

"Come up ole hoss!" cried one of the troop, leaning down and seizing Abner's hand. "Put it there, cunnel," cried another, giving Abner the title he had won in the civil war, of which he had never said one word to us. "I reckon you'll find this wuss than Gettysburg," cried another. "Holy Juarez!" shouted a third. "Whar's Bazaine now?" But this indiscretion was immediately covered by a yell from several of the troop. "What's the matter with Bazaine?" And a stentorian yell of, "Nothing. He's all right"—words which sent Abner's tongue in his cheek and inclined him to stay with us. But I heard the man whom he had called Elihu whisper to him: "Don't give a cuss to that ole hoss. None of us ain't stuck on Bazaine. But that was to salve the wovnded feelin's of this here susceptyble race. Dum Bazaine, the sneak. But come on. We'll show ye some pretty fightin'." So Abner determined to leave us for the time. He took Sylvia's hand and bending over it, kissed it. "May God a'mighty guard ye, miss," said he. "And if this yer young feller don't do his share he'll hev to reckon wi' me. Make him play up to the game. But I guess he's square or you wouldn't take so much stock in him."

He squeezed my hand and, with a bow to the French captain which almost brought his wide-brimmed sombrero off his head, he leapt astride the horse which had been brought up for him, and rode off clattering in the midst of his old comrades."

I looked at Sylvia. What had he meant by saying that she took a lot of stock in me? She met my eyes courageously enough, but coloured as I held her gaze.

"Mister your friend is an old soldier then?" asked the polite little captain. "Ah! That corps is composed of fine fighters, but for discipline—alas! they know it not. They fight their own way and at their own will and that is all. It is very fine, but it does not win battles, that independent fighting. No. See," he added. "That is why we lose them."

Even as he spoke there came a mighty hail from the departing South American contingent. "Hi!" yelled Abner. "Let on to 'Phonse as I've gone for a pasear. I reckon I'll be back agin before sundown. Don't let him worrit. We shall meet once again when the sun goes down. So long."

I waved my hand in answer, but fixed my attention on the sight that was now developing in the road and to which Moreau had drawn my attention. Here came a shambling company of regulars, their red trousers black with filth, their blue tunics torn and greasy. They were unshaven, foul with dirt, emaciated with disease and want, furious and despairing from repeated defeats, contemptuous of their

leaders, desperate with the fear of the approaching enemy. They carried their arms in a slouching manner, as though they were burdens to be got rid of rather than weapons wherewith to fight for their country and their womenkind.

"What can be expected of those?" said the captain. "They are as bad as the worst of the *francs-tireurs*, and do as much harm to friend as to foe. Pah!" The little man spat out his disgust and led the way back to the château.

When we reached the hall he apologized for leaving me and Sylvia alone together. He did not know how greatly we desired this privacy.

"Well," said I, "there's no chance of getting the jewels while the soldiers are here."

"No," said she. "And yet if only I could have five minutes alone and undisturbed in the boudoir to the right of that balustrade I could get them."

"Well," said I again, "we must await our chance."

"You'll take them if you get the chance first, won't you?" asked she. "I may be forced to stay with the wounded even after the rest have evacuated the château."

"You must leave with me as soon as we have them, wounded or no wounded," said I. "It is a noble thing to look after the wounded, but it is not what we are here for. We are here for a specific purpose and everything must give way to that. Besides, I can't

have you remaining here under fire. My God! What should I do if you were hurt!"

And then it suddenly came to me that if she were hurt there would be no more light in the world for me. Now that the battle was drawing nearer every minute, if one might judge by the sound of the cannon, I knew that this woman was dearer to me than all the world. What was Maggie in my eyes compared with this brave woman? Pah! How could I ever have fancied myself in love with that finicking doll of pink and white! "Sylvia!" I cried, seizing her hands, "you must not expose yourself to danger. You must not. I can't bear it."

She flushed high and withdrew the hand which I had seized in the fever of my anxiety. "Hush," she said. "We must do our duty. Oh, Harry! Remember yours."

I cursed inwardly as I did remember it. How hard it was that I should be tied by the leg to that flavourless thing at home while there was this superb woman whom, I verily believed, I might teach to love me if I were but free!

What I should have answered God alone knows. But just at that moment there came a rattle of musketry that sounded quite close, and I heard the "phit, phit" of bullets against the wall.

Alphonse came rushing down from his watching place, and the captain ran after him. "They are fighting within a mile!" cried the Breton. "And I saw a German battery at

the gallop advancing to the edge of the forest near Cercottes. We shall be attacked here very soon."

"To your posts!" cried the captain, rapidly passing from loophole to loophole, and inspecting the men he had placed to fire through the openings.

"Come, sir," said he to me. "We must close the entrance and strengthen it."

He walked towards the massive door which was hung open on its mighty hinges. But Sylvia cried, "Will you not wait, captain, lest any of your own men seek shelter here?"

"Not I," said he. "War knows no sentiment. My orders are to hold this château with what force I have. To admit a rout would but disorganize my own men."

He closed the great portals with a clang and I helped him to push the great bars into their holdfasts.

The north side of the gallery which ran round the hall was plentifully supplied with mullioned windows. The diamond panes of glass of these had all been destroyed, and the open spaces filled in with feather beds and other non-penetrable stuffs from the furniture of the deserted chateau. As soon as Alphonse had given his warning he rushed up the stairway to one of the fortified windows, and established himself, with his belly on a feather bed and his head screened by another, his chassépôt presented through the vacancy between the mullioned ornamentation and the walls, ready to fire at the first sight of a



black helmet. The captain led me to that part of the gallery which overlooked the main entrance, and there left me with the revolver which Abner had given me, another French service revolver, and a chassepôt with two or three hundred rounds of ammunition. Then he turned to Sylvia. "M'mselle," said he, "there will be bullets flying here. May I ask you to retire to a more sheltered chamber? You shall have entire control of the ambulance here, and it is for you to choose your hospital."

Sylvia gave me a quick glance. "Thank you, captain," said she. "I think there is a little room, a boudoir, to the left of the gallery which would suit us admirably for ambulance quarters."

"Aha!" cried the captain. "You are no stranger in this château."

Sylvia laughed. "It is five years," she said, "since I was here. The Louvets lived here then. I came with my father, Mr. Dumergue."

Now the name of Dumergue was famous as a financier even in France, and the captain was not a mere soldier and nothing more. Indeed, he came of a good family and had been well received at the Tuileries before the outbreak of this deplorable war. He bowed low at once and expressed the honour he felt at meeting the daughter of the "Illustrious M. Dumergue." At the same time he seemed puzzled. It was no wonder that he should be puzzled to think what the millionaire's daugh-

ter could be doing in that galley. Then suddenly he brightened, and said, "Ah then, m'mselle. You remember our Imperial mistress!"

"Indeed I do," said Sylvia, seeing that she had an Imperialist to deal with. Probably the greater part of the French officers were Imperialists at heart and considered themselves as bound by their oaths to the Emperor. One of the chief causes of the French disasters was the *déchéance*. Though the revolution was popular enough in Paris and in many of the greater towns throughout France the officers of the army never really loved Gambetta and his party and fought with but poor stomachs for the riff-raff who were now at the head of the government.

"I left her Majesty at Hastings," she said, "less than a month ago."

The captain started and looked sharply at her. Perhaps he suspected that she was over there for Imperial purposes. But he was shrewd enough to ask no questions. But after that he treated us with even greater consideration than before; indeed, the gallant little officer became almost obsequious.

"Did you leave her Majesty well?" he asked. "Should you have the honour of seeing her again, may I beg you to assure her of the devotion of Henri Moreau. I kiss her Majesty's hands—the loveliest, the noblest woman in the world."

I had never seen the Empress and had no notion of the devotion which her personality

seemed to impose on those who were her servants. But I began to perceive that the ardour of the little captain might be very useful to us in our mission.

I gave Sylvia a look, and she saw and understood and agreed.

"Captain," said she, laying her hand on the soldier's arm, (I did not quite like this because it was too similar to her dainty manner with me. Was she then always an opportunist, and nothing more? Was I no more to her than this captain whom she had only met within the last hour or so? Did she use her charm solely in political interests, and had she no thought for those on whom she exercised her fascinations beyond their respective utilities as tools in the enterprise in which she was engaged? I felt distraught, unhappy at the idea. Then I looked at her and the magnetism of her eyes satisfied me. No! She was a true woman. She might be binding this captain to her apron strings for utilitarian purposes. But she did not regard me solely as a tool to bring the jewels into her possession!)

"Captain," she said again, and in the flash of time in which all the preceding paragraph had rushed through my heart and brain she had satisfied herself that I understood. "Are you indeed a true servant of her Majesty?"

The little neat officer fell dramatically on one knee. "M'mselle," said he, "I care not if you are a spy of the government—though one so lovely could not be a spy!—but I will never deny her Majesty. As for the

communist blackguards (for that is all they are!) who are ruining France, why, if they wish to cashier me for my loyalty they may do so. God knows I take no pride in fighting for them—only for my country and in the hope that the empire may return with victory. Trust me, lady, if you are a servant of her Majesty's. I am hers to command, to live or to die."

Now this was very admirable indeed. Far more than we could ever have asked of fate. Here we were in the desired château, garrisoned by the force of which an officer was in sympathy with our mistress.

Sylvia drew a paper from her bosom. "Do you know that writing, captain?" asked she.

The captain took the paper reverentially and pressed it to his lips. "M'mselle," said he, "you have but to command, and so far as my loyalty to my country will permit me I will obey."

"Then," said Sylvia quickly, "if it is possible, let me have that boudoir I mentioned but now to myself for ten minutes. There are valuables belonging to the Empress therein which I have come to fetch. How they got there does not concern you. But I pledge you my word that you will be serving her by doing as I ask."

"Enough! enough! m'mselle," cried the gallant little fellow, kissing her hand with a great deal more fervour than I thought necessary. "The boudoir is at your service, and I will myself see that you are not interrupted."

Sylvia was returning her thanks, when there came a great tumult without and a crash from some part of the buildings of the château. At the same instant from every loophole left to the nor'ard the chassépôts spat their venom, and at once the hall and the balcony around it whereon we were standing were full of stifling powder smoke. It was no time for jewel hunting. Even Sylvia recognized that and followed me eagerly to the nearest window which looked out towards the forest.

No sooner did we get to a spot where the shelter of the feather beds and mattresses no longer dulled the uproar without than all the terrifying din of approaching battle fell full upon our ears. Where we stood discussing loyalty to the Empress had been completely walled about with muting material. Otherwise we could not have failed to hear the din before. I gave a glimpse out of the loophole and saw the northern part of the forest ablaze with fire and smoke. The French guns were now belching forth their inadequate thunder in a clearing of forest but a few hundred yards from the chateau. Here one battery was plainly visible. And from other peaceful nooks of the lovely forest came the sound and reek of guns. The enemy were pressing south, and the superiority of their artillery could not be withstood. Time after time I saw a German shell light upon the devoted battery, till, at length, there were no men to train the guns, no horses to withdraw them. Still, from every tree in the forest

ahead, defending marksmen sent their chasse-pôt bullets against the attacking force. Still the Germans had to make their way through a thick wood well held by brave infantry.

But now that obstinate refusal to recognize danger, which the Germans had displayed at Forbach and Woerth, and most of all in the terrible ravine at Gravelotte, urged them on and on in the face of any hail of bullets. The French cannon were now silent, their artillerymen dead or wounded to death. How long would be it before our turn came? We could not expect that such a point of vantage as the château would be left in our hands without attack.

"Come," said Sylvia, shuddering, "there is no time to lose," and she took my hand and began to draw me towards the boudoir. But even as she did so there came the horrible crepitation of a volley, the bullets struck the walls without with that "phit phit" which sounds so pleasant on a target at rifle practice, but so horrible when oneself is the target. And, with a choke and gurgle, two of the men at the centre window of the north fell back, their mouths gushing blood!

At once Sylvia forgot the jewels. "Oh, poor fellows!" she cried, running to them.

Two slinking regulars (who had been brigaded with the garde mobile) came forward and offered to carry the wounded men to the temporary hospital. Who could refuse? Certainly not Sylvia. She directed them to bring the wounded as tenderly as might be to the

little room wherein lay the jewels. But I doubt if, as she looked at the bullet wounds, she even remembered that in that panel, to the left of the doorway, was the secret recess wherein reposed valuables to the extent of half a million sterling!

It was no time now for aught but fighting, sheer hard desperate fighting. Yet I thought, could I not get Sylvia away towards Orléans and so escape before she was in greater danger. Even as I thought that this might be done there came another burst of "phit phit" from the southern side, and I knew that the Germans had got between us and the town and that there was nothing to do but to fight to a finish. Well, there were worse fates than that, and doubtless if the worst came to the worst and the case seemed hopeless our gallant little captain would surrender and explain that I was a non-combatant.

As yet I had taken no active part in the fighting, and could have justly claimed the privilege of a neutral and a civilian. But I was to be put to the test of manhood, and, thank God, I did not fail.

The battery ahead of us was destroyed, and, fortunately for us, this distracted the attention of the German artillery from us. They had greater work to do than to turn their might on a sorry château defended by but a handful of men. That could be left to their infantry, who were now thronging the forest and driving the French before them.

teen. Behind this party the black helmets carried out three corpses, two stalwart young men, and a woman of the prime of life. As soon as the sward was reached the dead were thrown down and stamped upon with horrible spite. I saw the lips of one of the German soldiers move to spit upon the dead, and I saw him and his comrades laugh as he perpetrated this foul outrage. Then I saw the two old people and two young led before the officer who was resting on the trunk of a tree. I could not, of course, hear what he said. But I could tell from the noble, furious looks of the peasants that he was insulting them as well as he could with his incomplete command of their language. (And it was noticeable that almost every German officer during that war knew enough French to insult and outrage the feelings of the unhappy peasants or provincials who were at his mercy!) Then I saw the four backed to the walls of the cottage. A firing party stepped out. There was a volley, and the four brave peasants, two little more than children, and the other two past the permitted age of man, fell, dead, at rest, thank God, from the foul tongue of their conqueror!

I saw the man gesticulate to his company, or those of them who were still capable of action. And, in a moment, the cottage blazed. Then, one by one, the dead bodies were hurled upon the blazing ruins, while the Germans laughed and chuckled at the delicacy of their humour.



"My God!" I cried. I sought my rifle almost unconsciously, and found that it was ready loaded to my hand. I had not intended to join actively in the battle if I could avoid doing so with honour, for it was not my business to get involved in warfare. My business was to get the Empress's jewels and to bribe Bazaine with them. But the sight of those foul murders in that pretty forest clearing maddened me. My friend the captain had not seen what was happening, but he saw my excitement. "What is it, my friend?" he asked. "Oh, my God!" I cried. "The bloody murderers." And e'en as I told him what I had seen I lifted my chassepôt to my shoulder and took as careful an aim as ever I had done at the butts. "How far will this rifle kill?" I asked, my blood tingling to kill one of those foul hell-hounds at least. "Over a thousand yards," said he. And the officer was certainly not more than four or five hundred. "Thank God," said I. I knew I could not miss. I levelled my barrel carefully, and rested it on the bottom mattress which guarded the loophole of the window. I pushed the sight up to 500 yards and took a fine sight a little over the top of that damnable black helmet. Then I fired.

I think I must have hit him in the face, for I saw his hand fly up towards his mouth, even as he fell back, extinguished, killed, the swine, the filthy scoundrel! Killed by my hand!

Then for a moment I was mad. I screamed out to the captain what I had seen, and I longed for more blood, more blood. The thirst of battle was upon me, and I yearned to scatter death among those filthy brutes as man may scatter seed. Never, oh! never believe, whoever reads this book, that the Germans were aught but savages in their conduct of much of that war. Perhaps their temper wearied of the long resistance—for I believe they commenced the campaign with some show of chivalry. But by the time that I first encountered them they had become cannibal warriors, and the horrors of Bazeilles were to become precedents for the ordinary conduct of the war. I ask my readers to think of this, and to remember that, recently, in my old age, I have seen and heard Germans complaining of our troops in South Africa for burning farms whence treachery had emanated. Why the Germans in the war of 1870 did not wait for treachery! They found a village in their way, a village which contained some man who could not satisfy their rapacity, some woman who refused to pander to their officer's lust, and they burned it down and half the inhabitants in it. Never was there more brutal and savage war than that waged by those troops of a man who boasted himself a Christian. Never dream that if these pig-eating, beer-swilling brutes ever again have a nation at their mercy they will be more civilized than before. They are animals and savage ani-

mals, and the sooner the Latins and the British drive them from the face of the earth, the sooner will this world be clean of a foul and contaminating influence.

I loaded and fired again and again, and I thanked God, in my fury, that at each shot one of those bloody Bavarians fell. But, while I was glutting my revenge, we were being surrounded. When the fifth black helmet had fallen to my aim, the captain seized me by the sleeve. "Mon dieu!" he cried. "But you are a sharp-shooter! But listen. We are attacked on the other side. Come, I must not leave my men longer."

The frenzy passed from me, and I recollected that below, in the boudoir where the ambulance had been arranged and where the jewels were to be found when opportunity came, was Sylvia! Sylvia, who might, if we permitted the château to be taken, be exposed to the brutality of that party which I had taken so much pleasure in thinning. As for myself, I cared little that what I had seen corroborated the captain's words, that if I was taken with the signs of fighting upon me I should have but a short shrift. My blood was roused. To fight those demons to the death and to protect Sylvia with my last breath were the only two duties that seemed material to me at all. With my face red with fury and my hands already black with the recoil of the powder (for some of the chasse-pôts were but clumsily closed at the breech), I ran down after the captain to the gallery

round the hall, where now the firing was incessant.

"One instant!" cried the little captain dramatically; "let us see how our fair nurse succeeds! Ah! What is nobler than a noble woman!"

I agreed with him, but thought the time ill chosen for rhapsodies of any kind.

We entered the boudoir, and found Sylvia pale and sad-looking, bathing the wound of the last applicant for her help. She looked up at me, and there were tears in her eyes. "See," said she. "And all he cries for is his master." I looked, and saw that the man who had been stricken through the head was Alphonse, and heard from his lips an incessant appeal for "M. Abner, M. Abner!" Alas! Where Abner was we could not tell. This faithful fellow who had guided us so well to our destination would never see his beloved master more. Even as I watched, and took my mate's hand to comfort her, he gave a little shudder, and then rolled over on one side quite quiet.

The Captain removed his peaked cap for a moment, and I heard him mutter a prayer. He was a good Catholic, like the man for whose soul he prayed.

"Harry," whispered Sylvia, "Don't think I'm unfeeling. *But I've got the jewels!*"

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE FALL OF THE CHÂTEAU

SHE had got the jewels! The news was electrifying. It was our duty now to get out of this hurly-burly of bloodshed as speedily as possible and make our way to Metz. But how to do it? Even though I heard and appreciated the news, I was unable to do more than signify my understanding and my admiration by a rapid glance, for, no sooner had the little captain's lips ceased to move in prayer than there came a terrific crash at the main entrance.

"Come! Come!" cried Moreau. "The enemy are forcing an entry!"

We hurried to a window which overlooked the main doorway and looked outside, puzzled to see that none of our men appeared to be shooting down on the approach. The reason was plain enough as soon as we saw the cause of the crash. The enemy had now surrounded the grounds and woods of the château and were drawing in from all sides on the detachment of Moreau's men which had been detailed to hold the woods about the building. The defenders now formed an ever narrowing ring about us. Scarce a tree of decent girth but screened a sharp-shooter in red breeches. But the outer ring which hemmed them in was too strong for them. Volley after volley

crashed and tore through the woods, and so thick flew the bullets, that at every rattle of concerted fire the defenders grew fewer. Scattered about the woodland rides, pitifully exposed on the little sweep of lawn in front of the château, lay the dead, or writhed those to whom death would have been welcome. Through the cover of the thickets my glass showed me a bristle of black pointed helmets which ever and anon stopped for a space. Then followed the crepitation of a volley, and then with relentless insistency the German line drew in. Driven from their outer posts a body of French had become unnerved, and had rushed to the château for shelter. It was they who had dashed against the door which was closed to friend and foe alike. Crash! came another volley from the enemy, and the poor fellows struggling to enter fell in swathes. They would have done better to have kept to the screening tree trunks. But it was too late for that now.

"Oh!" I cried. "For God's sake let us let them in before the enemy approach nearer!"

But for a few seconds Moreau cursed them under his moustache. "*Sâcré!*" he cried. "*Les laches!* The cowards. Why did they not hold their posts till all were dead? Let them suffer."

But as he spoke there came another volley, and again the struggling horde upon the steps was decimated. We could not leave them open and exposed longer. Nay! It seemed better to recall all those without the

walls, and to strengthen our own defences as much as possible. Moreau gave a word of command to a bugler, and his bugle rang out the recall to those still fighting at fearful odds amidst the beauty and peace of the autumnal woods. They came hurrying back, such of the poor fellows as could hurry. But there were others whose limbs were maimed, who had suffered such loss of blood that they no longer had the strength to retreat. And these it wrung my heart to see. I would ask my readers to remember that this was my first experience of warfare. To me it was horrible to see the poor fellows striving to wriggle their wounded bodies towards the château. It was horrible, when the door was swiftly opened to admit those seeking shelter, and as rapidly closed as soon as all the fifty or sixty who had been able to reach the château were within. Even amidst the roar of distant cannon (for there were no guns brought up to attack us) and the threatening shouts of the advancing Germans the piteous cries of those who were left without rang with terrible persistence in my ears. I thanked God that Sylvia was spared that sight, that sound. In her retired boudoir she could occupy herself with the wounded—a sad enough duty, but one of helpful mercy and infinitely more endurable than to watch the poor fellows whom it would have been madness to attempt to help. Our duty was to hold the château as long as we could, and we should not be justified in leaving the doors

open long enough to give the enemy a ghost of a chance to rush them.

Oh, those damnable Germans! Once, twice, three times, I saw one of the hell-hounds raise his needle gun and point it at a wounded man, writhing his poor body along the ground in the hopes of reaching shelter. Three times the rifle spoke, and three times that apotheosis of brutal bloodthirst—the slaughter of the wounded—stained the ruffian's military honour. Then I drew a bead on the villain, and slew him with an easy heart. But he was not the only one. Every man among the barbaric Teutons seemed mad with the hunger for slaughter, impassioned to glut himself with inhuman cruelty. Some of you, my readers, will have read of the horrors of Bazeilles. Many of you will remember that when Mr. Chamberlain compared the burning of farms in the Transvaal with the conduct of the war of 1870 by the Germans, there came an outburst of indignation from that lying treacherous nation claiming that their glorious troops had waged war with the utmost humanity. Now I tell you that Bazeilles was but an incident. That worse horrors than even those burning houses, those incinerated corpses, those murdered civilians of Bazeilles were perpetrated by the Teuton savages all over France. That that day at *St. Jean de Ruelle* there were abominations of hellish cruelty that would have made Gilles de Rez blush with shame, and that in every corner of France the same wanton



lust of blood, delight in torture for the sake of torture, was revelled in by the so glorious army of the fatherland. Oh, let England ponder well ere she permits fools or traitors to drag her so low as to lay her at the mercy of the Kaiser's battalions. Let her wrap herself in an ægis of battleships so powerful that even that megalomaniac, that epileptic braggart, the "Man of War," may pause before he attempts to land his foul myrmidons on our sacred territory. Those of us who saw the conduct of the German troops about Orléans and in sundry quiet rural hamlets where there were no unfriendly critics to publish the infamy of the barbaric hordes in the journals of civilized countries, can only wonder at the madness which blinds the pro-Boer, Little Englander party under that arch—that arch *party follower* Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman.

I was seized with a frenzy of hate against those lechers of slaughter. I loaded and reloaded my chassepôt as swiftly as I could, I took steady aim, and I rejoiced to see a brutal animal fall at almost every shot. Still they came on, gallantly as our men fired from their loopholes. We had now some forty wounded within the château, and over a hundred hale and whole fighters. We were not stinted for ammunition, and the sight without the château had stirred the heart of every man amongst us to the point of defending his post with the last drop of his blood. What profit, even for a coward, was

it to surrender to troops that killed the wounded? No. Let us all lay down our lives in the attempt to kill ten of the attacking force for every Frenchman slain.

From all sides the German bullets now rattled against the château. Now and then a chance or lucky shot (alas! unlucky for us!) penetrated one of the small spaces left for us to fire through, and took its toll. But our fire had become so true and fierce that even those blood-glutted Teutons faltered and broke line.

Almost out of sight lay a mobile, with his two legs shattered by bullets. He had rested his back against a tree trunk, had fired his last cartridge, and was peacefully awaiting capture. He had done his utmost. It was no flaw in his valour that made him lean back, weak with loss of blood, hysterical with pain, to surrender himself to the advancing Germans. The black helmets drew nigh him. I saw him lift his arms to them in token of surrender, and I saw a red-bearded hog-faced brute of the sausage-bellied race drive his bayonet into his throat and withdraw it, after a wrench, laughing.

I had nothing to do in that galley of war. It was not my business to become embroiled in fighting, but to get away with Sylvia and the jewels as soon as might be. But the wanton brutality of these victorious dastards (for however callous a man may be in action he is a dastard unless he knows how to treat his vanquished foe with courtesy and humanity)

had maddened me. I forgot the jewels. I forgot the Empress. I only did not forget Sylvia because the horrible chance of her capture by those black-helmeted blue-coated fiends racked my brain like nightmare. And so I fired and shouted with any fevered patriot of all about me. Moreau himself (now pale-lipped, red-eyed, hoarse breathing, maddened even as I was by the atrocities he saw) was not more eager to kill than I. We must have killed more than ten of the attacking party for each one of our men who fell. But still their huge preponderance in numbers enabled them to make way. La Motte Rouge had sixty thousand men. Why could he not send reinforcements to this point, this vital point, the chops of the channel of St. Jean de Ruelle, the approach over the North Bridge into Orléans? Doubtless the vast body of his army was engaged to the north and west, over yonder, whence came the incessant growl of cannon. Whence at intervals I could see shot and shell flying high over the château to do their fell work within Orléans itself. For the day was lost. There could be no doubt of it. It was but four o'clock of the afternoon and already the German shells were falling in the streets of the town, already preparations were being made for a grand attack on St. Jean de Ruelle, an attack which was impossible until our château was either taken or screened by overwhelming force.

Moreau had disposed of his men as skil-

fully as possible. Not a place of vantage but was occupied by as many sharp-shooters as could aim therefrom. Not a weak spot in the walls or windows but was held by the utmost strength which could be spared. The rattle of the rifles was now becoming incessant. No moment passed without a crack and a flash. The Teutons were mowed down in awful numbers. But still they came on. Four officers fell to my chassépôt alone, and I gloated over their fall—the damnable offal gorging hounds. But though the clearing and the woods about the chateau were thick with dead barbarians, and with wounded Frenchmen who had been bayoneted by the merciful Germans to put them out of their agony (!), the narrowing circle could not be withheld from the very walls of our defence. Little by little they crept up till their bullets began to sing with terrible consistency through the loopholes of our riflemen. They were so close now that for one of our men to expose himself by firing from a screened opening meant to court death from a score of enemies' rifles. Our forces began to diminish very seriously. The dead were many. The wounded more. But these last, almost to every conscious man, begged to be supported in some position whence they could still fire until death struck them. The gallery round the hall, the hall itself, was filthy with blood and powder stains. The boudoir in which Sylvia tended the wounded had long been a horrible shambles.

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A crashing volley poured into the weak places of the château. A guttural howl (the barbaric cheer!) sent its raucous menace through the air. The enemy were at our very door, beating upon it with the butts of their needle guns, crashing on it with the trunk of a fallen tree which they had carried from the woods for the purpose of a battering ram.

Just as the tree was being swung a second time to force a breach there came a shrill yell and howling from the road, and what was left of the South American Corps came galloping through the gate. There were nearly a hundred of the gallant fighters left, and these at once began to shoot with a revolver in each hand. The Germans dropped in ranks. The tree fell on the steps, and still those rough riders, in their picturesque ponchos, with their lariats curled in front of them, poured in revolver bullets at the rate of about twelve each a minute. Then, when there was no living whole man to dispute their advance (for it was only a portion of the attacking force that had advanced as far as the doorway), they gave a yelling cheer and dashed forward. I saw Abner spring from his horse and leap through a window on to the mattress which screened it from the German fire.

I heard his comrades shout a wild farewell to him. I saw nigh a hundred nooses whirl in the air, nigh a hundred arms fling those nooses at the reinforcements of the Germans

which were advancing from the woods; I heard another wild yell and saw the gallant body of cavalry gallop off, a black-helmeted head within every lasso, a German, hanged as murderers should be, dragging behind each flying horse. Before the stolid fighters had brought their beer-sodden pea-sausaged cerebral convolutions to bear upon what was passing the South American Corps (or what was left of them—about 50 per cent.) raced through the iron gates out into the road again, each towing a tumbling jerking body at his horse's heels. Before the stolid Teutons could get their needle guns to bear upon this lightning force the melodramatic sombreros and ponchos were out of sight, galloping merrily towards Orléans, having left their comrade Abner where he prayed to be left, and having done as much harm to the enemy in thirty seconds as most of the French troops had done throughout the day.

"Wal, stranger," said Abner, picking himself up from the mattress upon which he had fallen through the window, "I guess I thought I'd call in and see haow you was gittin' on." He spat out a mouthful of blood as he spoke. A bullet had smashed past his front teeth and driven them from their gums, but without doing him further harm. "Whar's little missy?" he asked. "I reckon this ain't no place for her. It's time for her to be travelin'. Say, mister?" he said to me. "Don't you agree with the old man?"

I did. But it was impossible for us to

escape. I knew that this was clear enough to Abner, and that he was merely hiding his heroism in coming back to certain death so that he might fall with us. I held out my hand and grasped his huge bony fingers. "Say, stranger," said he solemnly, "I guess I like you. Let me see the little missy and then we'll git our weapons on these yer coyotes what fire on wounded men. Why, man," he continued, with a fury of passion in his voice, "I've seen 'em this day sabre poor little gals and old women, ay! and tear the babe a suckin' from its mother's breast because a man took a pot shot at 'em for luck! Pah!" he spat out more blood, and I led him to Sylvia. Alas! Just as I was pushing him through the doorway into the boudoir an unlucky shot came through one of the windows, and struck him, ricocheting from his forehead. No wound was made, but it knocked him senseless. Even as he fell, almost into Sylvia's arms, there came another crashing at the door, and I knew that the enemy were using their battering ram again.

I hurried to the window over the approach and fired, fired till my chassépôt and revolvers were both so hot that I could not bear to touch the barrels. And every moment the defensive works grew weaker. How long we might hold out we could not say. But surely it could not be for long.

While I was firing my hardest I felt a hand (and I knew it for Sylvia's) touch my coat

sleeve, now all blood stained. "Harry," said she. "When there is no more hope of defence, I want you to come to me in the boudoir. Promise me that you will."

I was eager to get in my shots, and I promised without thinking how important a matter it would prove for me.

"That's right," said she. "Then I think I can promise that you won't be killed for a civilian. But now, dear, you must fight. Oh! I wish I were a man to kill, kill those devils!"

She had called me dear, and neither of us noticed it! She withdrew, swiftly and quietly, to her ambulance. I fired and fired and fired.

Moreau was dead. He had been shot in the centre of his forehead and never knew what killed him. Three quarters of the defending force were lying at their posts, dead or dying. Still we kept up a brisk fire upon the enemy. At last came the final crash at the door. It burst open and the Germans streamed into the hall. I emptied my revolver and my chasseur at them, and laughed to see that I had laid half a dozen low in as many seconds. Then I remembered my promise to Sylvia, and hurried into the boudoir. Even as I entered, almost in the same spot as Abner had been stunned, I felt something hit me—where I hardly realized—all grew dark. I fell crashing down. I just felt some one seize me and drag me along the floor when all sense left me, and I knew no more.



## CHAPTER XVII

### WE ESCAPE FROM BURNING RUINS

WHEN I came to myself it was in darkness. A stifling odour of smoke, of burning horrors, was in the air. My throat choked, my gorge reeked, at the foulness of the atmosphere. And yet, though all the air about me was pestilent with a filthy smother of burning cloth, burning straw, and burning animal matter, the place was cool. But for a dullness, a numbness in my head, I felt little the matter with me. But where was I? Was I alone? I stretched out my hand and felt stone, stone all round where I lay.

But as I moved a soft dainty hand stroked my head. "Hush," murmured Sylvia's voice in my ear. "It is not safe to speak aloud yet."

Though I still felt as if I had suffered some knock-down blow (as indeed I had) I began to discern the shapes of things about me. Everybody knows that after a few moment's in a room, which at first seemed pitch dark, one can see, catlike, till the darkness becomes less opaque every moment. Soon I could make out the glory of Sylvia's cloud of dark hair, and see the glitter from her brilliant eyes. And, when a dry chuckle (a whispered

and restrained chuckle) fell upon my hearing, I could faintly see the tall lank figure, which I guessed to be that of Abner Tingey, bending down close above me.

"What is it?" I muttered. "I know you are here, my mate, and Abner too. Or am I dreaming, or dead?"

There was something so pleasantly mundane about the nasal murmur that reached me from the tall leaning shape of a man that it woke me to the realities of life instantly.

"I guess you're alive all right, mister," hissed Abner. "Thanks to—to your devoted sister!"

A crash and rumble of some awful fall roared above us, and I felt the soft hand, which still lay upon my forehead, shudder.

"But where am I?" I persisted. "How is it that we are all here—in this dark and gloomy cellar, or dungeon? I can remember being hit, just as I was entering the boudoir. What has happened since?"

Again I felt Sylvia shudder. "Are you strong enough to hear everything?" she asked. "With God's help you and all of us three are safe, I believe. But the utmost caution is necessary."

I felt my strength returning to me, and when Abner held a flask of brandy to my lips I sucked down a good draught and was able to sit up and try to look round.

"I'm nearly all right," said I. "Tell me what has happened."

"Oh, the brutes! The brutes!" cried

Sylvia, and then, for the first time since I had known her, she burst incontinently into sobbing.

"Wal," said Abner, in his slow drawl, "I reckon as them beerslingers have been celebratin' a fourth of July in a manner which does more credit to their originality than to their manliness. The château is burnin' like a cracker, and the French dead, ah! and some o' the livin' too onless I'm mistook, are burnin' with it. Them swine bust their way in afore I come to myself, and while you was lyin' knocked silly. Then missy here sloshed some cold water over me and I come round. 'Ketch hold!' says she to me, a p'intin' to your inanimate carcase. And when I ketched she pressed some mystari-ous spring in one o' the old walls of the bood-oyer which led on to a stone stairway. 'Hoop lá,' says she, in a manner of speakin'. 'This way to the tombs!' Down she went, she with yer head and I with yer feet, till we come to the very bowels of this here donjon keep. Stranger. I tell *you* I thought 'we'd woke up in the middle ages, and looked round for Rebecca and Rowena. But missy she just shet the panel which let us through, and led the vanguard hitherward. This here oubliette is solid stone, and couldn't burn if it was plastered with ile. Here we hev awaited your resurrection. While above, in the halls of dazzlin' light, them blasted coyotes killed quick and dead, hale and wownded, and then piled the lot, some livin' some dead, in a bloody heap and set light to 'em. If ever

old black Satan bred a set of hell hounds more after his heart than them Bavarians I reckon I never heard on it. Talk about Apaches! Talk about the Sioux. Why Injins is pison, but Injins is lambs alongside these noble German troops! See here," he bent and caught at my hand. "Can ye stand?"

Now that the deadness had passed off, I felt almost myself again but for a great stiffness of the neck. I seemed to bear no bleeding wound. I felt no cut nor bullet hole. I could stand, and said so.

He led me to a grating which let a little feeble light, apparently moonlight, through, down a tunnel, into the cellar wherein we were. I looked up it and saw the sky ablaze with red and yellow. "They are havin' auter da fees of the whole village," said Abner. "I don't reckon to cuss often. But if the Lord will give ear to the gentle hymns I'm a singin' in my inside, I reckon them Germans will rot like scabby sheep, and if I could blast 'em as they rot I'd do it."

He stopped speaking and gave a huge scraping rake of his throat previous to expectoration.

I turned to Sylvia, whom I could now clearly distinguish in the gloom. "But how did you bring us here?" I asked. "The enemy were in the hall when I was knocked over."

"Yes," said she. "But the gallant Frenchmen—and oh! Harry, Frenchmen *can* be gallant, gallant and noble!—saw them kill two or three wounded, and after that there

was no question of giving or asking quarter. They fought to the last man, and defended the stairway so fiercely that it was some minutes before one of the brutes made good his way to the gallery. By that time Abner had come to himself, thank God, and I had used the secret spring I knew of. When I was here with my father the Comte de la Beauce showed me the old secrets of the house, and the spring which opened the boudoir on to the stone steps which led down to the cellar which had been prepared in old times against any attack from the Jacquerie. There's a tunnel which leads out into the fields, unless it has been blocked, and this was in my mind as much as the jewels when I chose the boudoir for my ambulance chamber. There are two exits from here. One to the stables, and the other to a distant part of the grounds. And oh! how thankful I am that I thought of this cellar. The fiends who beat us by sheer numbers have burnt dead and wounded together, they even dragged in some women and children they found in the outbuildings and threw them on the holocaust. I can hear their screams now, for when they were thrown in the fire I had not been able to get you very deep down the stone stairway. The whole inflammable part of the château is now but ashes. But for the stone hiding-place we must have been even as those others."

She ceased speaking, and left me to think of what had happened while I was unconscious. Oh France! If ever you seek your

*revanche*, sword in hand, old as I may be, bound to home by wife and children as I am, I will use my last strength to fight with your army against those savages. Europe can never be civilized till that horde the Kaiser calls his glorious army has been wiped out, has been turned to the carrion which it loves.

Even now, as I sit in my study, overlooking the North Sea, and think of the secret preparations for the discomfiture of our beloved England which are going on across that narrow strip of ocean, I could find it in my heart to spit in the faces of the men who are neglecting our defence from such horrors as were inflicted on the French in that war of Prussia's aggrandizement. I could lift my voice in prayer "Lord! Lighten Thou the darkness of those who would betray their country to gain the votes of a parsimonious ignorance, and let not their iniquitous folly be visited upon the nation."

But the more I loathed the German brutes, the more I felt my heart glow with love and gratitude towards Sylvia. To her alone did Abner and I owe our safety. In the dimness of the cellar I sought her hand and raised it to my lips, and as I kissed the dear tenderness of it I thought I felt a tremor run through this noble girl. Maggie! What was Maggie to me. If ever Sylvia and I returned safe to our native land, what could any one be to me in comparison with this girl whose courage and dexterity had saved my life, had saved the lives of all three of us!

But it was no time for love-making, or for thinking of dalliance. We were still in the utmost danger. Saved from the fire which those ghouls had made to burn the bodies of quick and dead alike, we were still in the midst of their forces, for we could not doubt that they had occupied Orléans before night-fall. Haply they had left the chateau after they had seen it well ablaze. If so, with God's help, we might make our way out by the secret passage to the stables or into the fields.

"I say," I said. "What hit me? How was it that I was floored and that now I don't feel as if there were much the matter with me?"

Abner gave a dry chuckle. "A bullet struck a chassepot lying near you and lifted it so that it caught you on the p'int of the chin. I reckon, mister, you've had what fight'n' men call an uppercut on the p'int. It knocked you out of time for longer than usual, because I reckon as powder and ball can hit harder than any pug's fist. But you come round at last, and except for a bruise, I'll lay two dollars as you won't be much the worse. But you give us a shock, mister. You give us a nasty shock. At first I thought you was gone, and little missy here, she——"

"That will do now, Abner," said Sylvia, calling him by his Christian name. "We must think about the ways and means of getting clear of this now."

"You've got what we came for?" I asked.

"Yes," said she. "I've got the jewels all safe. Abner knows. He has been too good a friend to distrust any longer. And he'll help us all he can."

"That's so," said Abner blandly. "I'll help ye; and we've saved your bag of dollars! But I reckon as you're wastin' time and tissue. That derved skunk Bazaine will take the German bribes and the Germans' favour. But if ye kin bribe him to fight, wal, he kin fight like hell. I've seen him. Never was there a man with more sand when once he rattles that sand up. But I reckon as that's late now. But you serve the Empress, and she's the Emperor's missis, and I take a lot o' stock in pore Nap. Fust of all his uncle did the straight thing with the States, and then this feller took off his dorg Bazaine just at the right time for Juarez and me. Yes. I'll help ye. My pore 'Phonse has gorn, and I don't care much what I do now so as I help Nap or Mrs. Nap and let as much of that stinkin' Prussian blood as I git a chance to let—and if we can razzle up old Bazaine to fight real he'll knock the stuffin' out of the Red Prince or the Pink one ayther. I'm on. Put it thar."

We "put it thar," and then we began to discuss our future movements.

Abner sighed. "Pore 'Phonse," I heard him murmur. "Burnt up there like a b'ar in a prairie fire!"

"First," said Sylvia, "have either of you any matches?"



Abner sighed regretfully. "I guess I chaw," said he.

Fortunately I smoked, and, mindful of the atrocious quality of French matches, I had stocked my Norfolk jacket pockets with a goodly supply of vestas. I pulled out a box and handed them to Sylvia. "I hoped you might have some," said she, laughing. "You don't 'chaw,' do you?"

She felt about the walls of the cellar long before she lit a match. I began to understand that it would not be safe to show a light where we were lest it might be spied through the grating, for, although we believed that the Germans had deserted the château after having set it well alight, we were not certain that this was so, and they might very well have left a few men on guard. But presently Sylvia cried, "I have found the way to the stables. Shall we try that first?"

Well, there was just a chance that one or two horses might be left in the stables, though it seemed more likely that the Germans had taken them for their own purposes. We could steal along the stable passage and retreat if we found there was danger outside.

Sylvia pushed something, and then I heard her footsteps pass a little way. Then she lit a match and it flared up and showed her in a tunnel cut through the solid stone wherein the cellar had been hollowed out.

We followed her as silently as we could, and I could not but admire the stealth with which Abner glided rather than walked on the stone floor.

The tunnel was of fair size, but, of course, not sufficiently tall to enable Abner and myself to pass through without stooping. However, Sylvia walked on ahead upright and we followed her as easily as we could. The tunnel ran perhaps sixty feet before I saw Sylvia mount a few steps. She fumbled with her hand above her head and a grating rose. Presently we were all three in the fresh air of night, the fresh air which had had its charm spoilt by the reek of the horrible pyre which the "glorious army" of the Germans had lit.

As we lifted our heads above the level of the earth, Abner whispered, "I reckon I'd best go fust. I'm no tenderfut at trackin' by sight or smell."

For the first time I noticed how similar his Yankee dialect was to our East Anglian homespun. Even at that moment of intense excitement I found myself wondering if the Puritans from East Anglia who had gone over to America in the time of Charles II and thereabouts had impressed their accent on the mighty nation which was to arise from the ashes of their Britannic loyalty.

Abner's suggestion was obviously a good one. He had tracked "Injins," as he called them, and been on the warpath against men with senses keener than those of Europeans. So Sylvia waited for him to precede her, and, to my intense delight, fell back to me, and took my arm.

We could see the ruins of the burnt château.

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Even then the fire was smouldering and sending up a reek of pestilential smoke. The outbuildings seemed to have been spared. There were no human beings in the outbuildings on which the enemy might glut their bestiality. There was no sign of any watch set. There were no bodies lying about, though on the ground we passed over a full score had fallen. They had gone to swell the volume of the blaze.

Lightly we stepped across the turf till we came to the stable. The doors were open, and there was no sound of fretting horseflesh within. And yet Abner said that his instinct told him that there was at least one horse stalled therein. We entered, and passed along the passage at the back of the stalls. And here, at length, we heard a low gentle whinny. We soon found the stall which was tenanted—the only one of all the score of boxes. The moon was mostly hidden by a spread of cloud, but now and then peeped out, and during one of her self revelations we saw that the horse which had greeted us so discreetly was the rough and clumsy-looking Breton steed which 'Phonse had chosen for himself. Well, he was better than none. But, search how we might, there was no other bit of horseflesh in the stable. Doubtless the Germans had taken all the best looking of the horses, but left this sorry steed as being valueless. Their consideration for animals might have been inferred from their treatment of men.

But, flung down in a corner of a stall, we found Sylvia's side saddle.

"I reckon we can make out," said Abner. "Little missy can ride this yer broncho buster and you and me can hoof it alongside. Come, ease him out."

He bent to the straw at his feet and took four wisps which he tied carefully round the hooves of the Breton charger. He silently saddled the horse with the side saddle, and led him out on to the turf.

"You hev them jules?" said he. And Sylvia whispered, "Yes," pressing her hand to one side of her skirt. The dear girl had so abused her womanhood as to wear a large pocket in her dress for the very purpose of receiving the jewels. Never could woman's devotion go further than that!

"Then," said Abner, "that's time for us togit. Whar's our p'int now? Metz I reckon."

It seemed absurd to think that we three, practically alone in the midst of a ruffianly enemy, would ever get to Metz. But it was absolutely certain that we should never arrive there if we did not try. So we could not do better than make the effort whatever were the issue.

"What abaout that map o' yours?" asked Abner drily. "A sight o' that would be grateful and comfortin'."

But that was impossible, for we dared not strike a match in open air. But I glanced at my pocket compass in the gleam of the moon and found "East."

"Right," said I. "Bear to the right till we find a road."

Silently we crept out into the open, silently we stole along the drive into the roadway. There were no watchers at the château, or if there were they were asleep. We got into the main road to Orléans, struck to the left, to the north for a short distance, then, in the midst of the woods, we held our way to the east and trusted to find a road to take us towards Metz, and to keep it till we were beyond danger of being suspected of having helped to hold the Chateau de Quatre Cheminées on that day of German blood lust.

Morn found us still riding in the forest, but far from the scene of the previous day's battle. Our fortune seemed to follow us with kindly interest.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A *FRANC-TIREUR*

NOW that the daylight had come I took a look at my map, which had most fortunately been preserved together with the bag in which I kept my cash for use as emergencies required. We were still in the forest and seemed to have been keeping too much to the north, so we turned eastwards and presently were on the good road which runs through the forest to Pithiviers and Malesherbes. From what poor Moreau had told me it seemed fairly certain that the German forces which had beaten La Motte Rouge on the previous day had marched south from Versailles, and had not come west from the Rhine. Unless Moreau was wrong (and he might easily have been under a misapprehension, for the French were woefully ignorant of the dispositions of the German armies) we should not run much risk of interference from the enemy if we kept to the east without moving further north than Chalons until we got to Metz. The Red Prince had his army round Metz and Manteuffel was in the north, Moltke, the Kaiser and the Crown Prince made their headquarters at Versailles, and Von der Tann had occupied Orléans. Apart from these dispositions all was uncer-

tainty, but it appeared probable that there were only scattered forces between Orléans and Metz and that these might be avoided with the help of the peasants.

While I had lain insensible in the cellar Abner had removed all stains of fighting from me and from himself, had changed his poncho and sombrero for a less noticeable costume, and had removed the cross from Sylvia's arm—for it would be difficult to explain the journey of a nurse across the middle of France accompanied by two foreigners like Abner and myself. We trusted to the use of my good gold and to the kindness and sympathy of the French.

At Chilleurs aux Bois, a small town or hamlet just on the borders of the forest, we obtained refreshment of which we all stood greatly in need. The good people at the inn had been terrified by the sounds of fighting, and welcomed us with eager hospitality as soon as Abner let it be known that we had been engaged in the battle and on the French side. From the good hostess we obtained much useful information as to the best places for us to seek rest and food on our way to Bar le Duc, the route she advised us to take to get to Metz. "Mon homme á moi," said she, with tears in her bonny eyes, had been wounded at Gravelotte and was shut up in the fever-stricken camp round the virgin city. She warned us, as our good farming body in Brittany had warned us, that we might find *francs-tireurs* who were as bad as the enemy,

and that we might run the risk of meeting some of the roaming bodies of Uhlans who made their name so infamous throughout Central France. She refused to accept payment for our food and drink, but, again like the Breton woman, asked for a kiss from Sylvia, which was readily granted, and the two women kissed each other with tears in their eyes. Never shall I forget the sweet, unassuming kindness of the hospitality which we received from many of the unhappy afflicted folk of beautiful France. Merely to sympathize with them in their sorrow was enough to win their love. "I wish," said the good hostess, "that we had a horse left. But a troop of *francs-tireurs* took our last not a fortnight since. God guard and protect you, my pretty one," she said to Sylvia. "The Virgin and the blessed Saviour have you in their keeping." She crossed herself and muttered an *ora pro nobis*. Doubtless she did not know the exact meaning of the Latin she prayed in. Doubtless to many sardonic critics she was a terrible example of superstition. But I never knew religion or the assumption of it sit ill on any but a hypocrite, and this good woman and many of her like with whom we were to have to do, practised the charity and good will to men ordained by the Master they worshipped. The continual reference to Christ, or even to the God of Battles of the Old Testament, was abhorrent on the lips of the King of Prussia—a man who thanked God for the shambles



of the ravine at Gravelotte ! But these simple and sweet-natured French peasants believed in their Church, in the teachings of their *curés*. The atheism of Paris and some of the larger towns never obtained any influence in the rural communities, and, for my part, I found the patient trust in times of agony which we met with every day among the peasantry infinitely preferable to the blatant bombast of vapouring Gambetta.

When we had rested as long as we thought right we again saddled "d'Artagnan" (as we called our Breton steed in memory of that famous yellow animal on which the Gascon hero rode into Paris), Sylvia mounted and we two men, each with a hand on her stirrup leathers (for we had slung a leather on the offside for the express purpose), ran beside her while the little horse trotted gaily along. I laughed as I leapt to the pace of the horse. How often, I thought, had I run up from Baitsbite to the railway bridge on the river Cam holding on the stirrup leathers of the rowing coach on horseback. "I reckon," muttered Abner, "as this is like that time when me and Elihu Johnson runned from the Injins when all the frontier settlers lit out."

Yes. His experience with the stirrup leather was considerably different from mine. I decided not to recall my Cam remembrances aloud.

So well did our mode of progression answer that we reached the cross roads at Pithiviers, a distance of over ten miles from Chilleurs

aux Bois, in little over an hour and a half. Here we repaired to an inn recommended by our last good hostess, and gave our willing d'Artagnan a spell and a sponge down, while we were all of us the better for a good draught of the excellent "warming" little Touraine wine which Thackeray praises in Philip. Still we were unable to buy more horses, and when we had proceeded as far as Malesherbes we made up our minds to go no farther that day. We were now well away from the scene of the fight round Orléans and had little fear of being disturbed by the Germans. The landlord of the *Faisan* at Malesherbes was an old man and had not been called to the wars, and while Sylvia sat and talked with his daughter, who really kept the inn, Abner and I listened to the old fellow's yarns and helped him to dispose of two magnums of fine old Nuits from the pride of his cellar. He advised us to wait till we came to Chalons before we bought horses. "You'd never get safe through the woods about Nemours with a horse that was good to look at," said he, and though we had no intention of going so far north as Chalons, his advice seemed good.

On the following day we got off betimes. But we had not proceeded more than four or five miles when we heard at La Chapelle that there were Uhlans on the road ahead. I had always been of opinion that our best course would be to travel as much as possible by night and to rest in some hospitable auberge during the day. But no one of us knew the

roads well enough to risk a night journey. Could we find a guide? We missed poor 'Phonse, though had he survived the fight at the château he would have been a stranger to the route necessary for us to take.

After trying the old woman at the small wineshop of La Chapelle and learning that she had not one son only but three who were out in the neighbouring woods as *francs-tireurs*, we came to the conclusion that we could not do better than procure one of these sons to act as a guide. If the bodies of *francs-tireurs* were so numerous and so dangerous as they were reported to be, he might only not act as a guide, but also as a sort of free pass for us—that is, if he could be trusted to be true to his salt. A hint to the wizened old dame who boasted under the rose of being mother to three gallant *francs-tireurs* brought a sly smile to her eyes and mouth.

"Oh!" croaked she. "But how can I fetch one here?" She looked at me so sily and so suspiciously, that I was sure she doubted the bona fides of our request and that she feared lest we might be setting a trap wherein to catch her sons. Many of the communal authorities of small rural hamlets bore a great grudge against the *francs-tireurs*, for any success against the Germans which the guerrilla marksmen might obtain was visited on the villages near the scene of their foray or success, and the village mayors preferred to save their skins and their property at the expense of their patriotism. "See here,"

said I, raising my head so that the underside of my chin was visible to the crone. "That bruise was made by the Bavarians at Orléans. You need have no fear lest I should try to do harm to your sons. The gallant men who are trying to kill as many of the Prussian pigs as they can have my love and admiration."

I liked this old woman less than any hostess with whom I had yet conversed, but at my words, I could not deny that there was a nobility about the fire of her expression. Oh! How she hated the invaders! How she loathed the mean-spirited mayors who accepted the tyrannous insolence of the Germans with complacency rather than risk their houses or granaries by a bold stroke for vengeance.

"Listen," she cried, clutching my arm. "My sons are comrades of François Hitter of Metz, he who laughs at the Prussian lines and passes through them whenever he wishes! Ah! m'sieur! My sons are patriots! They would die for one who loves our country!"

Even in England we had heard of Hitter, the famous guerilla chief who potted the Prussians outside Metz like so many sparrows and who threaded his way through their lines as though he had the power of appearing and disappearing at will. If the old woman spoke truth nothing could have fallen out better.

I jingled some gold in my pocket. Much as my own East Anglians love "brass," the French peasants love it better. The old woman's eyes twinkled amidst their crows' feet.

"M'sieur will pay for the danger?" she asked.

I hesitated no longer. "Listen," said I. "If your son will lead us to Metz, I will pay him fifty Napoleons. If he can get us through the German lines to have speech with Marshall Bazaine, I will pay him a hundred Napoleons."

"And you will pay me, his old mother, something," said the crone, "now, at once, lest you should all be killed. Ah! In these times no one's life is safe. Pay me twenty good Napoleons now, and all shall be arranged as you wish."

Well it was useless to haggle with the old woman. I promised her what she asked. She begged for her money there and then. Again I gave way. She seized upon the gold and mumbled over it. Then she cried out, and a lad about ten came running in from the edge of the woodland which stretched almost to the inn. She whispered a few words in his ear and he ran off again, grinning. Presently I saw him begin to climb the trunk of a lofty poplar, which was well furnished with its slender upright shoots nearly to the ground. High up in the tree he fastened a rag which shook and fluttered in the air. Then the young monkey slid down, turned a somersault, and ran back to the inn.

"M'sieur," said the old woman, a few minutes later, "Behold my son Jean."

Striding, with long rapid paces, with head held high, and eye glancing on all sides hawk-like, came a stalwart man from the woods.

He was tall for a Frenchman, almost six feet in height, and, withal, possessed the stout build of his race so that he looked a veritable giant of strength. He wore a woollen blouse of a greyish green, and round his waist was knotted a scarlet scarf. A wide-brimmed hat of some soft material covered his thick long hair. His face (where a luxurious growth of beard and whisker permitted the skin to be seen) was dark with exposure to the weather. Over his shoulder he carried a beautiful Remington, by his side hung a scabbardless cavalry sabre, in the scarf belt two revolvers and a formidable-looking knife were visible. Altogether he presented as ferocious an appearance as any man I have ever seen. But there was none of his mother's underhand slinking about his expression. He looked the whole world in the face, and challenged each man to show his manhood. No finer *franc-tireur* can have spoiled the Egyptians in the shape of the Germans.

His mother ran on shaky legs to meet him, and while the two approached I saw her gesticulating eagerly and jabbering away to him. He paid little attention to the old woman's chatter, but strode straight to me, and saluted by doffing his hat with French courtesy.

That evening we went on our way under shelter of the night, and the ugly little Breton horse which we had despised bore Sylvia in our midst and trotted or walked patiently, willingly, with an endurance which might have been wanting in the steeds of prouder lineage.

## CHAPTER XIX

### REVANCHE

FOR two days and nights we went on our way without meeting with any noticeable incident. We slept at some inn chosen by Jean Berger during the day, and at night went swiftly and silently along secret paths where no Germans were like to be found. Each night we were challenged more than once by some body of guerrilla troops, but Jean was either too well loved or too well feared for any one to attempt to molest those under his charge. I tried to make him talk of his adventures during the war, but he was a taciturn man. He led us well and carefully, and he turned eyes of dog-like devotion on Sylvia (she fascinated all with whom she came in contact !), but he refused to be drawn into conversation. He promised over and over again to pass us actually into Metz. But he would say nothing as to the means he intended to employ to compass this difficult feat.

On the third night when we were passing through some marshy country among the upper tributaries of the Marne, somewhere between Vassy and Joinville, the cry of an owl brought our guide to a stop. It was about two in the morning, and the moon was doing its best to pierce the biting autumn mist

which turned the thick plantations of poplar and willow, alder and larch which covered the borders of the morasses into an impenetrable screen. The night was very cold, and we three male footfarers had kept the little Breton horse at a good pace in order to warm ourselves. I had said that the cry of an owl brought our guide to a stop. We all halted with him. He raised his hand in warning. Then, from his lips, there issued the very scream of a terrified hare.

"Qui vive?" murmured a hoarse voice, so close to us that it made us start.

"Jean, le loup," hissed our guide.

Immediately a number of shadows, filmy and indistinct in the white haze, surrounded us. In an instant Abner and I had a revolver in each hand and had covered our two men apiece. But Jean waved us back with a gesture so full of restraint and dignity that we could not doubt his honesty of purpose. "Ils sont des amis," said he. Hestrode forward and joined the group of shadows.

"Oh, Harry," murmured Sylvia in my ear; "how exciting! I wonder what's the matter!"

The misty group of men was agitated. Its elements moved about and took bizarre, weird shapes in the mist. Though no one of them spoke above a whisper it was evident that some discussion of moment was progressing. Presently Jean came striding back, looming through the haze like some monster of antiquity. "Listen," said he. "There are mat-



ters toward which are more to me than any money you can pay me. But you, you yourselves claim to be the friends of France, nay, you have sworn that you have fought for France. If so, all is well. I ask you but to fight for France again, and to fight alongside a body of brave fellows who will do you honour as their comrades. If you will, come with us. Ere daylight our work will be done, and I shall be at liberty to guide you on. But tonight I am summoned by my duty to my country. If you will not join us, well we must keep you here or hereabouts till our work is over. We dare not risk what might happen should you go on and blunder into the arms of the enemy. But oh! sirs! I beg you to join us."

Neither Abner nor I were unwilling to do as Jean asked. But it seemed certain that we were invited to take part in some warlike enterprise which might put Sylvia in danger, and that I was loth to do.

"But m'mselle?" said I.

"By the life of my children," said Jean, "she shall come to no harm. She shall not run the risk of a hair of her head being injured. I will place her in a spot of perfect safety while we others are about our work. Then, when all is over, we will rejoin her and go on our way—with a sense of duty done."

The language was remarkable for a peasant *franc-tireur*. And perhaps that influenced our decision. But, anyway, what could we have done if we had refused? There we were, in a

narrow path surrounded by a treacherous morass, in a difficult light, uncertain of our locality. How could we go on without our guide? Although I felt some indignation with Jean for placing us in a situation of so much difficulty, it was not the time and place to give vent to my feelings. While I was hesitating, Sylvia spoke. "No, no," said she, "we will not be parted. Where my friends go I go."

Jean laughed in his throat, almost noiselessly. "Ah!" he said, "m'mselle is a true daughter of France"—which she was not, nor wished to be, but Jean meant to be complimentary.

"Sylvia," I murmured, "think what you are saying."

"Hush! oh, hush! Harry," said she. "Do you think I would leave you—and Mr. Tingey, of course. No, no. Whither thou goest I will go, thy——" She broke off in confusion and even in the dim light I could see that her face had crimsoned. And I—the quotation struck upon my heart and put me in a heat of love and solicitude. For some days I had given up all thoughts of any other woman but Sylvia. All others seemed impertinent, unnecessary. I knew that it was useless to contend with her now.

"Good," said I. "We are with you."

"That's so," said Abner quietly. "But what do you reckon is the proposal beefore thisyer meeting?"

The others, those quaint shadows of the

mist, now came up, and showed themselves to be a body of a dozen stalwart men, rough and uncouth for the most part, rudely armed, foul with weariness and dirt. But determined men—fine types of those guerilla warriors to whose adroitness Germany owed so many widows and orphans.

He who seemed to be their leader was a man as tall as Jean Berger, but without his width of shoulder or massive loins and thighs. He was an older man, with grizzled beard, prominent nose, piercing grey eyes. And he addressed us with true Gallic dramatic power.

He pointed to the north, in the direction of Bar le Duc, and he hissed rather than spoke. "Over yonder," came his sibilant French—which was the French of an educated man and not of a peasant—"over yonder is the little village of Poiry-sur-Marne. Yesterday a troop of Uhlans and two companies of Prussian Landwehr demanded guides through these bogs. They called for volunteers. No one came forward. Then they demanded the oldest and the principal man in the village to be brought before them. The oldest was old Pierre Murger, an old man who has lived all his life in the fear of God and in love and charity with all men, an old man as nigh to being a saint as a poor peasant may be. The principal man in the village was the Comte de Ligny." I heard his voice tremble as he spoke the latter name. "The fond and devoted husband of—of my daughter," he forced himself to add. He paused a moment and I heard his tongue

scrape round his dry palate, I heard his teeth click together. "The officer in command of the Uhlans asked the Comte if old Pierre was conversant with the secret ways through the bog, and the Comte refused to answer. 'I take that for assent,' sneered the Uhlan. 'Now, old man, I order you to guide us.' Old Pierre bowed his head. 'Never will I,' said he. 'Go. Ask one of your thousand spies who have been living here, enjoying our friendship, partaking of our hospitality, with black treason in their hearts. Ask one of those, your kindred. I will not guide you.'

"The Uhlan captain gave a sign to his men, and immediately both Pierre and the Comte were seized. 'Show me where each man has his dwelling,' cried the Uhlan. But no one moved to obey him. He laughed. Yes, I was hidden behind a hedge not far from him, and I heard him laugh. 'No matter,' said he. Then he pointed to the two men who stood before him, their arms held by his myrmidons. 'Hang them,' he said. 'Sir!' cried the Comte, 'I am a gentleman. If you persist in this ruffianly action, I demand to be shot.' But the officer answered him never a word. While the village stood, looking on, helpless, they took the Comte and the old man who had not an enemy in the world, and who had passed his life blamelessly in charity and labour, and hanged them on a branch of the walnut against the inn. Then said the officer, 'To-night my men and I will shelter here. Bring all the choicest food and drink you have, and

mind this. If you are found to keep back anything your fate will be even as that of those.' He pointed to where the bodies hung, swinging, still quivering. 'To-morrow,' said he, 'as the winter begins to get near and the days are cold, I will light you such a fire as will warm you admirably. Ah !' he said, pointing to Célie Berger, old Pierre's granddaughter, 'bring that girl to amuse me.' I had no arms upon me. When I go into the village I leave my arms behind lest my people should suffer for me. It was well. I could but have killed one or two before I died myself. But as soon as I might with safety I stole back to my comrades of the marsh woods. We sent out messengers. We are at least two hundred strong. Come, sirs. What would you have us do ? Those Uhlans, those Prussian devils, are sleeping in the inn, at the Comte's château, at the mayor's house. Are sleeping. Shall we let them wake ? Shall we let them die facing their death ? Or shall we send them to their master, the devil, sodden in their brutal slumber. Say, gentlemen. What do these men merit ?"

I heard Sylvia give a little moan as the horror of the guerilla chief's story developed. I felt Abner grip my biceps till I could hardly bear the pressure.

"Scotch the rattlers !" hissed Abner, and his voice was as harsh and feverish as the *franc-tireur's*. For my part I did not trust myself to speak, but I reached forward and seized the guerilla by the hand. He felt my

meaning, and his eyes met mine in such a hunger of hate, and yet such a prophetic ecstasy of joy, that he imparted his own mad eagerness to me.

"Come," said he. "The rest of us are among the larches. Come, and the less noise the better."

Jean drew back and closed in by the side of Sylvia. "We must keep m'mselle out of it, sir," said he. Then he gave a little chuckle. "It will be brisk work," said he.

But Sylvia drew the revolver she carried from her pocket. "I have this," said she. "I will not leave you." And Jean, like me, persisted no more.

As we recommenced our march a faint rustle came back to us from the front. It was the starting of the two hundred men who were sworn to leave no German alive in Poiry-sur-Marne by morning. We were now the rear-guard, and through the thinner wisps of vapour we could sometimes make out the serried mass of heads walking swiftly but silently, with the stealth of the true woodsman, ahead of us. Our course now turned a little to the left, and kept alongside a brook or winding dyke. Though so considerable a body of men were marching together their feet were so silent that even we, who knew that they were there, could hear nothing of their progress. Suddenly the uneven ranks halted. But passed on again after little more than a second's delay. I saw the vanguard turn into what looked

like a road, and when I walked past this turning place I saw two bodies, in Prussian livery, lying in the hedge with their throats cut. Our silent warriors had slain them before they could make a sound. Then we halted again, while the gaunt leader strode here and there, detailing parties to attack the mayor's house, the Comte de Ligny's château, all the houses or cottages where the enemy were billeted for the night. Stealthily, cowering behind any hedge or cover that might offer, we advanced into the village. Jean and our party were asked to hold the southern end of the village street and to make it our business to see that no German escaped in that direction. It was a duty that suited me well. Though I loathed the Germans, I should have had a difficulty in bringing myself to slaughter them in their sleep, as most of them would be slain.

Two more sentries were disposed of as effectually and as silently as the other two. Then all the separate parties were in position. Again I heard the cry of an owl ring out, and at once the silence of the night was changed to an uproar as of Pandemonium. Shrieks, guttural curses, Teutonic prayers for mercy, filled the night, and to their terrible chorus there was an awful accompaniment of thudding blows, of pistol shots, of trampling backwards and forwards, of shouts of mad delight in slaying. I heard the officer's hoarse voice grunting out some futile orders which could never be obeyed. I heard the guerilla

leader's shout that the officer was to be left to him. Then from a cottage door to the right of us there tumbled two helmetless Prussians, their clothes in disorder, their eyes staring, their hair ruffled, almost on end with terror. I heard Jean chuckle, as he leapt at the foremost and drove his knife home, almost simultaneously decapitating the other with one sweeping blow from the razor edge of his cavalry sabre. Even as he cleared his steel two more of the enemy came clattering down the road, armed, one with his bayonet, the other with a sword. Jean was at their mercy. I whispered to Abner, "The right for me," and our revolvers rang out together. The two fell, one on the top of the other. I gasped. I had not meant to kill if I could help it. But I did not regret my shot when I thought of the infamy they had wrought in that quiet little peasant hamlet.

The shrieks and yells, the shots and thud-dings were almost over now. Presently there was one last yell, one last thud, and a Prussian fell from the gabled roof of a house whither one of the *francs-tireurs* had followed him. There was no more sound of fighting. The ghastly slaughter was over.

What was that? From the entrance of a drive which led to a large building (doubtless the château) came the leader. Behind him dragged rather than walked a stout red-headed officer in the Uhlan blue. His arms were bound behind him, and round his neck



was the loop of a running noose, the bight of which was held by the leader of the guerillas. The *franc-tireur* cried aloud and the villagers came trooping from their desecrated dwellings, came pressing round him, kissing his hand, calling him their deliverer, their avenger.

"Where are you taking him, the swine?" asked a handsome young woman. "He killed M<sup>rs</sup>elle Célie because she resisted him."

"My God!" cried the leader. "Is that true?" he asked, shaking his prisoner by the rope as a dog shakes a rat. "Is that true?"

"I warn you," said the German in very passable French, "that your village will be destroyed for this unless you let me go. I can save you, and only I."

"We could not trust you, pah!" cried many voices. "As for the village we are in the hands of God. Our comfort is that you and your three hundred men will never fight against France again."

The German began to be impassioned in his agony of terror. "I'll swear," he cried.—"I'll swear that I will save you if you will give me my life."

"Pah!" cried one of the *francs-tireurs*, expectorating. "We would not trust your holiest oath. A devil like you reckes naught of breaking oaths. No, no; we have a better plan than that. Aha!"

"Hey, François," cried some one of the villagers to the leader, "are you going to take him away alive?"

The man smiled grimly. "I am taking

him to the fruit tree he has planted," said he. "He will look well upon its branches."

A roar of approval followed, and wreathing hands, some of the villagers began a rough dance along the roadway. I could guess our destination, the place of execution of the officer—it would be the walnut before the village inn. As the exultant peasants danced my mind flew back to that dread dance of the carmagnole. There was something so terribly sinister in that aping of jollity at such a time. But it told volumes of the temper of the people and of their sufferings at the hands of their insolent barbarian oppressors.

"Quick!" cried the leader, as he halted his captive beneath the dangling bodies of the French victims. "Quick! A ladder."

One was brought and the two corpses tenderly lifted and carried away in decency.

"Now, you dog," said the leader. "Think yourself lucky we do not burn you as you have burnt so many poor French folk." There was a clamour for a moment, a roar of onlookers claiming that the unhappy Teuton should be burnt. But the leader brooked no interference with his plans. A fling of the rope, a hoist, and the German was swaying the walnut bough in place of the two innocent folk whom he had sacrificed.

Then the guerilla forces began to bring up carts, horsed and ready for their burdens, and into these carts were hoisted the bodies of the enemy to the full number. When

those we had killed at the entrance of the village were found there was a cheer for us, and we became the objects of more attention than I cared for.

"Can't we slip away now?" I asked Jean. And he nodded his head and spoke a word to the leader of his friends.

He came up to us and shook our hands, making as though to embrace us. But we escaped the latter compliments. He was a little too redolent of earth—and of blood—to be clasped too close.

"If ever you want our help," said he, "all or any of you, we are yours. Give but the cry of an owl as a sign and for miles round here you are certain of being heard. Farewell. We must remove these vermin lest the village suffer indeed. If no bodies are found here there is a chance of escape. Farewell. May all good fortune go with you."

We turned to the south-east and entered the secret ways of the morass. There was a cheer from over two hundred throats as we disappeared, for the guerilla chief had not lost a man.

I felt Sylvia's hand heavy on my shoulder as I strode along beside her little horse." "Oh, Harry," she said, "I feel faint. But I don't regret it. I don't."

I made her drink a little brandy from the flask I carried and she felt better, and held herself erect as usual.

Jean went on his way, as though nothing out of the way had happened to interrupt our

regular route. Abner looked rather more cheerful than before. "I always did injy scotchin' rattlers," said he, with a chuckle. "And that brood of 'em's bust up, I reckon."

I—well, I speedily recovered from the slight feeling of nausea which came over me when I saw the dead being pitched into the carts, and then I too felt the more cheerful. After all the brutes deserved their terrible fate.

I was still soothing my conscience with the thought of the vileness of those who had been slaughtered endeavouring to dull the idea that most of the poor troopers and privates of the Landwehr were but obeying orders, and were possibly decent good natured fathers of families, when I was conscious of a blow on the nape of my neck—I felt myself falling forward, I smelt the dank marshy land as I fell, then a great darkness, a complete insensibility came over me, and I knew nothing more.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE GREAT INFAMY

**W**HEN I came to myself I was lying on a rough bed beneath the slanting roof of what was evidently the upper chamber or attic of some woodland cottage. There was no glazed window, but a piece of oiled paper or prepared skin of some kind stretched taut over a small opening in the low wall and admitted sufficient light to enable any one to see their way about on a bright day. Outside I could hear the plash of water, and the stir of tossing boughs in the roar of a gale. The bed whereon I lay was but a rude truckle contrivance. I still wore most of my traveller's clothing; but some clean linen had been taken from my bag and placed on me. My coat was removed, my waistcoat loosened, and my collar and shirt neck kept from my throat. I felt weak and dizzy, and I closed my eyes as soon as I had given an inquisitive peep. But I did not keep them closed for long. While I was lying on my back there, silent, endeavouring to piece out where I was and how I came there, remembering by degrees that the last thing of which I had been conscious was the blow at the nape of my neck, I heard a faint rustling in my room, and the light tread of a woman's foot. Ah! Now I came to

my senses indeed. I opened my eyes wide, and looked about me.

In the dim light which filtered through that dingy window I saw Sylvia, her face in shadow, turned as it was towards me and away from the light. Her hands were clasped before her, and she was bending forward, peering in my face with a gaze of such intensity that I am sure I should have felt it had my eyes remained closed. But it seemed that I was mistaken, for she told me that often and often she had stood thus and watched me for some sign of returning consciousness, the while I tossed and groaned, groaned and tossed my fevered body on that sorry couch.

I held out my hand feebly. "Sylvia," I said. "My mate!"

She gave a little cry and bent close over me, so that her hair touched me and I sensed the sweet delicate perfume of her personality. "Harry!" she said. "Thank God you are yourself again!"

For a few moments I was content to lie there and hold her hand, which she surrendered to me without the slightest assumption of reluctance. Of course Maggie Ramsbot-  
ham still lived somewhere. I know that because I have seen her since. But so far as I was concerned at that moment she might just as well have been dead or have never lived at all. My world was there, before me. My heart sang its trill of love, weakly, tremulously as yet, but with all the joy of conva-

lescence. And Sylvia looked so radiant, so joyous, that it would have taken less of a man than I hoped I was and am, to remain unstimulated, unstrengthened by her presence.

"But how did I get here?" I asked. "What happened? I remembered getting a knock at the back of my neck somewhere. But I'm hanged if I remember anything else."

"Hush!" said Sylvia. "I'm sure you're not strong enough to hear anything about it now. Wait till you have got your strength up."

"No, no," said I eagerly, still holding her hand. "Tell me all. I am getting stronger every moment."

"Well," said she, "it was the 16th of October when you were wounded, and it's the 20th now. You've been unconscious for four days."

"But what happened?" I asked.

"It seems," said Sylvia, "that on our way to Poiry-sur-Marne we overlooked a Prussian sentry who was sleeping soundly in a bed of dead leaves out of the track. Jean tells me that these Landwehr men are not so well trained for the hardships of war as the first armies of the enemy, but are middle-aged men called up as reserves, and they cannot stand the strain to which they are put. This poor fellow (forgive me for calling him a 'poor fellow') only woke as we four were returning on our way. He was half awake and half asleep, and luckily for you, instead of firing on us he clubbed his needle gun and brought it down on your neck. He just

missed your head. He was dead almost as soon, as you fell, for Jean drove his knife through his throat so that he fell dead without one cry. But you—you were badly stunned. I think I should have persuaded Abner and Jean to push on after we had taken him back to Poiry. But you are my partner in the enterprise. I could do nothing without you even though the jewels were on me. Besides, to tell you the truth, I could not leave you."

She said this so simply, with so entire an absence of self-consciousness, that my love for her (to which I could no longer blind myself) was rather rebuked than encouraged. It seemed to me that she treated me as one betrothed to another, to whom she might show her sisterly regard without fear of awaking any warmer feeling. Well, even in my weakness, I knew that it was no time for dalliance. It was already the 20th and we certainly could not be back on the coast of Brittany in time to keep tryst with old Joe Thaxter and his jovial offspring. We must be up and doing. Metz might be hard pushed. (Alas! How hard pushed and in what danger of betrayal I did not guess!)

Sylvia paused a moment after she had told me of her reluctance to leave me. Then she continued, still permitting me to hold her hand in such perfect friendliness that my soul yearned for something more promising to my love. Even unkindness would give me better hopes of winning her.

"Jean knew of this hut," said she, "and



that the old woman who lives here is to be trusted, and, moreover, has extraordinary skill with unguents and herbal decoctions in healing the hurt. The hut too is in a secluded nook of a bend in the marsh, quite out of the way of any main road, impossible for any body of troops to approach. He gave his owl call and asked for the help of two of the *francs-tireurs* who had been at the revenge of Poiry. These brave fellows, and Jean and Abner fashioned a litter out of larch poles and rifle bands, and bore you here in a thirty-six hour march with only three halts. I would have had you mounted on d'Artagnan, but they showed me that you would be less jolted in a litter and that my poor paces would but retard them if I were to walk. So here you are my friend. And thank God that you are yourself again. The old crone who has steeped your bruise in herb decoctions and forced vegetable broths and what not down your throat assured us that when you woke to consciousness you would be able to travel as well as ever in less than a week. Jean has sent one of the wonderful guides who enter Metz in spite of all the enemy into the city for Hitter, and he is expected to meet us on our way on the 27th.

While she spoke I found my strength returning minute by minute. Whatever was the treatment to which the old woman had subjected me it was of marvellous effect. Shortly after Sylvia had left me and returned with a mess of pottage of some kind I felt well

enough to rise from my couch. There was a stiffness at the back of my neck, but little more than what I had suffered after the blow beneath my chin at the Château de Quatre Cheminées, though I had been rendered unconscious for a much greater length of time. I tried to rise but fell back helpless. I was still terribly weak.

Sylvia scolded me tenderly and fed me more tenderly; and after I had swallowed the broth and tidbits therein which she brought I felt much disposed for slumber. When I woke again it was after sunrise of the next day.

Despite the rapid growth of my strength it was not till the night of the 26th that I got on the way again. The old woman who had ministered to me kept out of my way. She insisted that it would bring ill luck to all of us if she made herself known to a man whom she had succoured under the circumstances in which she had played the doctor with me. Jean upheld her, and there was nothing for it but to leave her, with a good recompense for her care and skill, the which she was, strange to say, rather unwilling to accept.

In the early morning hours of the 27th, not long after midnight, we were nearing the lines of the Red Prince's army round Metz. Jean proceeded with great caution, and, in order to save as much of my strength as possible, in case of flight becoming necessary, he had compelled me to mount poor old d'Artagnan

behind Sylvia, so that we two were riding pillion wise on the meagre little Breton hack, with our bags strapped on his withers. But good horse, he never relaxed his exertions, never slackened speed. Well had poor Alphonse gauged the merits of the horses of his native province when he chose this ragged rough-coated cob for his own. I do not believe that any one of our swaggering handsome three-quarter bloods, or even the pure Arab mare which had been Sylvia's, would have been of so much patient and consistent help as this sorry little hack. He could live on what another horse would disdain, and climb where another horse would inevitably fall. He never neighed nor committed any indiscretion by night. He was indeed a perfect horse for the work we had in hand.

We were in a thicket upon a considerable hill, and, with the aid of my binoculars, I could even make out the fires of the German investment. We had crept into the wood from the Vionville road, and had just halted in response to Jean's commands. I slipped from d'Artagnan, and stood, with my hand resting on his crupper. Sylvia too leapt down beside me.

Jean was looking fiercely at the lights in the distance. He could see them with his naked eye. His face grew savage and yet, as though to mitigate his fierceness, and to turn his influence to pure tragedy, a quick motion of his head showed a gleam of tears in his eyes. "Poor France," he murmured,

and, for a moment, he hid his face in his hands.

But he was not a man to repine uselessly. While he could fight the enemy of his country he would do it. When all hope was over, that would be the time for mourning.

"Listen," he whispered. "What do you hear?"

We were hidden from the road, but the late quarter moon permitted us to see the sodden way winding below us. The rains had recently been terrible and every highway was knee deep in filthy mud.

Towards Metz there was a dull muffled sound as though of distant uproar. I looked through my glasses at the point of the encircling fires which was nearest to us and saw many lights moving and jerking.

"Hitter should meet us here," whispered Jean. "But that is not Hitter. We shall not hear him when he comes." He spoke with dry humour. No. If Hitter were to be heard on his night excursions he would not be the incomparable scout and guerilla chief that he was. But some one was coming our way, and that quickly. Nay. There was a noise as of cavalry galloping through the mud and slush along the Vionville road.

Jean was silently drawing further within the thicket when we heard a soft laugh at our very elbows. "Le loup se garde," murmured a voice of extraordinary sweetness and distinctness. Though the syllables were enunciated in the faintest murmur, each

word came to us clear and distinct as the notes of a piccolo.

"It is the master!" cried Jean, and was at once rebuked by the new-comer's hand upon his mouth. "It is the great Hitter," he said, in more subdued accents to us.

We looked at the famous scout with interest. He was slight and short, lithe, lissome, and wiry as an otter. He could not have been more than five feet three or four in height, nor more than thirty-one or two inches round his chest.

His face, covered with a full growth of silken black hair, was refined and delicate in feature. He spoke, he walked, he carried himself more like a *flâneur* of the boulevards than the most relentless and formidable enemy that the Prussians had encountered in Metz.

He wasted no time in preliminaries. "These are your friends, Jean?" said he. "They tell me, m'mselle," said he to Sylvia, with a bow of exquisite grace, "that you are all three friends of this poor France. God knows she wants all the friends she has."

"Sir," said Sylvia, blushing a little at the evident admiration with which Hitter regarded her. "Sir, these gentlemen fought for France at St. Jean de Ruelle, and fought gallantly."

"Ay," muttered Jean, "and t'other night at Poiry they proved themselves to be men. Ha! ha!" he chuckled low, "we destroyed those Uhlans and Prussians."

"Yes," said Hitter, very seriously. "It was well done. But the village has since been burnt down, and many of its inhabitants with it. Oh God!" he cried, raising his right hand to the sinking moon, "that France should see these wolves burning her fair hamlets, casting her women and babes into the holocaust of their lust. Never, never will I give over slaying till I die. If the war ends still will I slay those fiends. Still will I drink their accursed blood till my time is come."

He spoke in such a fervour of determination, and we were so enraged at the thought of the destruction of that pretty village, that we who were men raised our head coverings from our heads and stood in silence.

I think that Hitter was the first to recover himself. "But listen," said he. "Do you know what this is that comes?"

The sound of galloping grew nearer and nearer. Jean slung his Remington to the front and prepared to take it in his hands. But Hitter clapped him on the back, and bade him forbear.

"Heed them not as yet," said he. There was something melodramatic about his manner of speech. I heard afterwards that some people declared that at one time he had been a famous actor and that his name of Hitter had been taken from the English in a quaint jest to call to mind his ability to strike. But I think he was something greater than a mummer. He may have needed grandilo-

quence to satisfy the thoughts he had—it would be a French trick if it was so—but the man himself was great. Ah! Had he been in Bazaine's position what a different trend might the campaigns in the north-east of France have followed.

"First," said he, "I wish to speak with the three strangers. Are you all of one party?"

We hesitated. We did not wish to hurt Abner's feelings. But we had interests of which he knew little. He understood, I think, and was the first to speak. He used French, so that, but for his nasal pronunciation, his Americanisms were absent. "My friends here," said he, "have come from England specially in the interests of France."

I was afraid he was going to say of the Empress, and it was doubtful if Hitter was an Imperialist.

But he was always as shrewd and cautious as brave and capable.

"For my part, I don't wish to sail under false colours. I came over to help the Emperor—yes, by God," he cried out. "And to stick my knife into Bazaine if I got a chance."

Hitter laughed heartily, but noiselessly. He extended his hand to Abner, more after the manner of an Englishman or American than a Frenchman. "My friend," said he, "if I could help you to knife that scoundrel, I would with all my heart. He offered me the cross the other day and I flung it in his

face. Rely upon it that if you wish to harm Bazaine, I will help you all I can. But I fear me he is beyond the hate of either of us. Ah! If only I had known before! If only I had known before!"

He turned to us. "And you," said he, "you desire to enter Metz?"

"We, too," said I, "desire to speak with Bazaine. We wish to bring influence to bear upon him to be true to the trust reposed in him, to do his best for France, to lead his men to fight, and to skulk no longer under these walls."

A great sob burst from the brave man's throat. "Ah!" said he. "You wish that." He strode close up to me and grasped me by the arm. "Listen," he said, again drawing our attention to the noise of horses which grew momentarily nearer. "Do you know what that is?"

Even as he spoke a rider shot into sight in the road below. He wore the uniform of the French lancers of the guard and he galloped *ventre à terre*, his reins held between his teeth, his sword held in his right hand and his revolver in his left. On and on he spurred till he rapidly galloped out of our sight. On his heels came three more, and after them a troop nigh a hundred strong. Then a smaller troop. Last of all a solitary man, leaning wearily over his saddle bow, his horse limping painfully with blood pouring from its neck.

All five of us ventured out to the edge of the wood to watch this marvellous spec-



tacle. How could those French cavalry soldiers have got out? What did this mean? Was there actually a sortie in progress? If so, why did we hear no guns. There had been a few rifle shots not long before. But not sufficient to indicate any action of importance. What did it mean. Was Bazaine, without the incitement of the bribe which Sylvia carried in her pocket, was he going to fight his way out and save his honour and the honour of his troops?

"What is it?" I cried eagerly to Hitter. "Are they attempting a sortie *en masse* at last?"

"You see," said Hitter bitterly, "what a few determined men can do. Men with horses so starved that their ribs are visible on every one like those of some poor brute destined for the knackers. Think of it. To-day, the 27th of October, these men make a dash—and get through the German lines. Two months ago, when our men were well and strong, our horses fresh and eager, our arms burnished, our hearts high, our guns well horsed, what could not our army of 180,000 men have done? Do you know why those brave men have dared all to escape?"

A horror of what had been done, of what was being done, came over me. Instinctively I guessed what there was to hear."

"No! no!" I cried, "it can't be!"

"Can't be!" cried Hitter, and he shook his clenched fist towards Metz. "General

Boyer has been sent on a fool's errand to the King of Prussia, to ask for favourable terms of surrender. Think of that. The day before yesterday came a despatch from him from Versailles,—unconditional surrender! The night before Bazaine was seen riding in from Frascati—from an interview with the Red Prince, the last of many—it is notorious that he has paid almost nightly visits to the Prussian camp. After Boyer's despatch came in poor old Changarnier was sent to soften the Prussian hearts! Pah! Bazaine had arranged the whole thing the night before and taken part of his millions! I helped the Vicomte de Valcourt to get through the German lines with a message to Tours to make peace at once—of course Bazaine does not wish any one to fight longer than he—of course the Red Prince is wise enough to use the man's foul treachery to the utmost! Yesterday all humbug was disdained. The city is to be rendered unconditionally, the army to become prisoners, unconditionally, and, though this is not published in the orders of the day, Bazaine has earned his millions! What are those men? Why gallant fellows who refused to be bound by the orders of a traitor. Were the army but a force instead of a haggard mass of disease and starvation, every man would have taken up arms to force a way through the enemy. I had told Bazaine scores and scores of times that he had overestimated the German strength. That at

least a hundred thousand men had been withdrawn from the investment for Paris and Sedan. But he would not listen. He wished to earn his millions. And you," he turned to Abner, "you wish to kill the scoundrel. Come with me and I will lead you to the spot where he always passes after his nightly colloque with Prince Frederick Charles. Kill him and the thanks of the whole of France will be yours. By God, I'll help you, and share the honour if you'll permit it."

I had been whispering to Sylvia for some time. If this man were telling the truth—and the flight of those horsemen went far to corroborate him—we were too late. Whether we ever had the faintest chance of moving Bazaine to loyalty must be left to the individual opinion. For my part I doubt if he would have had the courage to break off his understanding with the Red Prince. If we had been able to get at him in the early days of August, before Courcelles, Vionville and Gravelotte had been fought, perhaps the Empress's jewels might have been enough to bribe him. But, so far as our enterprise was concerned, it had been hopeless from the first. But we had at any rate saved the Empress's jewels.

I touched Hitter on the arm. "Sir," said I, "if you are certain of what you say it is useless for us to go further. My business was to persuade Bazaine to be loyal, to fight and hold Metz to the last, or to make his way out to the relief of Paris. Now he

himself is a prisoner. The Germans would not dare to set him free. It would be too flagrant. Our task is done. We must make our way back whence we came and report. And oh! Sir! permit me to express my admiration for one who has ever set that traitor the example of courage, enterprise, resource and patriotism. So long as the history of this war shall last, and perhaps longer, so long shall the name of Hitler be remembered with honour and reverence."

I saw the man was moved. Indeed we were all moved, not only by our disappointment, but by the fierceness of the resentment which shone from every look, from every word, of the graceful and courageous gentleman."

To depress us still more the rain, which had been threatening throughout the night, now came down in torrents. The trees of the thicket which screened us had lost their foliage and afforded but scanty shelter from the floods which poured from the sky, now moonless and dark as pitch. Our hearts were low indeed, though our enterprise was over, and we were at liberty to return to England. Sopped, bedraggled, we stood there, hesitating to make the first move of parting.

"But you," said Hitler. "Whither do you propose to go? And how?"

"I think our best course would be to get to Marseilles," said I. "I believe the country is free of Germans south of Belfort."

"Yes," said Hitler. "Take this," he

added, writing on a strip of paper with a pencil. "Three miles to the south along the road (which will now be safe till morning) is a château. There they will give you horses and anything else you need if you show that paper."

I saw that both Abner and Jean were fidgeting. I spoke first to Jean. "Of course," I whispered to him, "the hundred napoleons are yours. They have been fairly earned. It is only this wretched baseness of the marshal's which has brought our journey to a sudden end."

But Jean waved his hands and expostulated. "No, no," said he, "I take no money from those who have fought with me, who have loved my country, who have been my true comrades in shine and storm, by night and day, who have been wounded by the enemies of my country, who have slain in defence of my comrades. No, sir. I grieve that the time has come for us to part. But I will take no gold of yours."

I could not but love the fellow. Never had a man been truer or more skilful guide. But for the delay caused by my unfortunate wound we should have entered Metz in time to make the offer of the jewels. I was devoutly thankful now that we had been too late. From all accounts the unhappy army had been permitted, nay, had been forced, to such a pitch of degradation of misery, of debility and disease, that for the last month it had been in no case to put up a good

fight. From the first day of the investment Bazaine had exerted himself (so far as it was in him to exert himself over anything) to destroy the discipline and *morale* of his magnificent troops. All the world knows how fine a show the guard made at the surrender—that superb guard which had not been in action! That unequalled reserve which would have annihilated the Germans either at Vionville or Gravelotte. But the Empress's bid for the marshal's loyalty was too late. And here again Bazaine's work might have been seen. It was owing to Regnier that she made the offer. It was owing to Regnier that she was too late. What would have happened if once Sylvia and I were within the walls of Metz, in Bazaine's power, with the jewels upon us, and Bazaine cognisant of the fact? I have never doubted that in that event Bazaine would have got the jewels without earning them and that Sylvia and I would have mysteriously disappeared. In those unsettled times what were a civilian Englishman and Englishwoman? No. If we had been foiled in our attempt, I somehow fancied that Bazaine had been foiled in his. For I believe to the bottom of my heart that he knew of the first envoy, who had shirked his task and left the jewels at the Château de Quatre Cheminées, and that he meant to get them if he could.

But enough of that arch traitor. It was something to be spared the defilement of coming to his presence.

But though we had failed I meant Jean to take my hundred napoleons. "See, my friend," said I, taking his hand, "take them, if not for yourself or your old mother, take them for the thousand poor devils who are being ruined by this war. Take them in the cause of France."

And Jean threw his arms wide, and—well, I could not escape from his embrace that time, and had to endure the rasping of his fine growth of beard and whisker. With Gallic enthusiasm Jean wept upon my chest, called me brother and swore to be my faithful friend for ever. And, to do him justice, I believe he meant every word. He finally agreed to take the gold, and I turned my attention to Abner.

The American was looking gloomily out through the rain towards Metz. "Stranger," said he, using the title he had given me at first, "I reckon as I'm real sorry. We've been good pardners, ain't we? And as for little missy, I love her like my own darter." He bent his head to my ear. "And if you git a chance to tell Missis Eugénie as a straight Amurrican come over here to see how he could do her a good turn, why take it, and we'll call it square. I hate to quit. But I'm bound to have a go at that skunk or bust. If ever I see the old island I'll find you where you live. Don't doubt it. I've got it all wrote down. And I'll be thar. As for you, little missy," he said, turning to Sylvia, and speaking with a wonderful and beautiful

tenderness in his voice, "I shall never forget ye. There may be gals in the States with as much sand in 'em as you've got, but if there are I reckon they're tough old hens and not pretty little pullets like you. I shan't never forget ye. And you'll give a thought sometimes to pore old Abner, the South Amurrican broncho buster, who cavorted on the Brittany roads with a hoss thief at the end of his lariat. I'll bid ye good-bye, and God bless ye, you little bit o' candy."

Sylvia's voice was choked and broken when she told him how she admired him, how she thanked him for his splendid resource and helpfulness, and for his care and tenderness. "And oh, Abner!" said she, "if things go ill with you *do* let me know. Write to Harry Fisher. He will know where I am——" She blushed in spite of the rain and corrected herself. "I mean he will be able to find out, and I—well, I am in a position at home to help you. Do promise, Abner, or I shall think you are unkind."

Not the devil himself could have withstood Sylvia's pleading when she begged like that. So Abner capitulated at once. He took her hand and raised it reverently to his lips. "I'll give ye my word, missy," said he. He too was a little hoarse by now. I saw that the sooner we separated the less painful it would be. But I had one thing more to say to Abner. "I say, old chap," I whispered to him, "of course you've got to take some



of this money of mine. What we should have done without you I can't guess. Anyway you must accept some of it—as a loan if you like—but you told me you hadn't the pieces over here. Collar hold. You'll be able to get these cashed somewhere here."

I shoved notes for a couple of hundred pounds in his hand, and at last, after more trouble than I ever had with any other man to get him to take money—even more than I had with Jean Berger, Abner consented, on Sylvia's joining in and declaring that she would not only never think of him, but think of him as a horrid wretch if he refused. An expression of intention slightly lacking in consistency but which answered its purpose to admiration.

Hitter turned as we had gained our purpose, and there was a smile on his fine features.

"Come, m'sieur," said he to Abner, "and you, Jean, had better return to your body of men."

Once more brief and heart-felt salutations were exchanged, and then Sylvia and I found ourselves alone with poor old d'Artagnan on our way to the château indicated by Hitter.

"Thank God I've saved the jewels anyway," said Sylvia. "But think of Bazaine! Would you have believed him to be so shameless?"

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE CONDITION PRECEDENT

**D**AYLIGHT was nearer at hand than we had thought. Scarcely had Sylvia and I got into the slush of the road when there came the cold shiver before the dawn, rapidly followed by streaks of grey over Metz. And, to make us the more anxious, we heard the rapid gallop of a horse coming up in our rear. We had gone too far to return to the shelter of the thicket where we had parted from Abner and the others, and there was nothing for it but to keep on our way like the harmless civilians which we had now become. Nearer and nearer came the soft splashing sound of the horse's paces, and I think we were both of us endeavouring to assume an expression of innocence which might have propitiated Bismarck himself when I heard a cheery hail. "Why, Fisher! What the dickens are you doing here?"

I looked up in amazement and saw that the eager rider was one Bertie Wedd, an old Cambridge friend of mine with whom I had kept in contact after he had entered upon his journalistic career in London. I had, however, lost sight of him for the last year or two, and I was just as surprised to see him on that road near the pestilence stricken city of Metz as he was to see me.

My heart leapt with pleasurable anticipations. It was more than probable that even Hitter might be deceived as to the inhabitants of the château, and that, having heard of the shameful treachery of the marshal, they had betaken themselves to regions which were more French than that fair province of France wherein we were had now become.

"It's too long a yarn to tell you now," said I. "But where I want to go now is England. Can you give us a hint?"

"You haven't been acting as French spies by any chance, have you?" said he. "Because in that case I fear I can do nothing."

He laughed, as though confident of our innocence. But had he known how near we had come to fighting on the French side—so near indeed that we had reached the place—he might have thought our position as bad as if we had been spies.

I laughed with him. "Not we," said I. "I escorted my sister Sylvia over here on a private matter. It was important for her to get into Metz. But now that the city has fallen it is useless, and we are eager to get back to Suffolk. But how is it you are here?"

"You don't read your *Daily Wire*," said Bertie. "I'm war correspondent with the Red Prince's army—at least, I was till Metz capitulated. Now I've had news which takes me home. But I'm quite in with the Germans, and as they are practically the masters of France I may be able to help you on your way. It's a bit risky travelling in these days without a permit. But you've probably got that."

"We've been all right so far," said I, avoiding his question. "How are you going home?"

"Oh, I'm going from Dieppe to Newhaven," said he. "Will you come with me. I can pass you over the lines easily enough."

It was a chance not to be missed. Moreover, now that we could get to Dieppe under the ægis of an accepted friend of Germany, it would get us home sooner. In three days we ought to be at Newhaven, and then we should be close enough to Hastings. For our first duty was to see the Empress.

"Have you any messages to send home?" asked Bertie. "I'm going to wire at the first opportunity."

I looked at Sylvia, but she shook her head. Our messages were not such as could be handed to a German telegraph authority to transmit and we had omitted to arrange a code.

To make a short story of a journey almost without incident of importance we made our way by road and rail to Dieppe with the assistance of Bertie Wedd. The only thing that annoyed me was his evident partiality to Sylvia. But I had no right to object to it. I had been compelled to introduce her as my sister. That, perhaps, made it the more bitter.

However, he was only with us a few days, and, on the 1st of November, we landed at Newhaven by the night boat, with old d'Artagnan with us—for I determined that I would never part with that gallant little Breton horse so long as he lived.

The boat got into the dirty little town

which Newhaven then was before it was light, and both Sylvia and I felt that we should be all the better for a rest ; besides, we wanted to shake off Bertie, who was forced by circumstances to go on to town by the boat train up.

We were both a little distrait and nervous that morning, when we said " Good-night " (no one can say good-morning on going to bed !). I know that I was nervous about the interview which I intended to have the next morning. Maggie Ramsbotham or no Maggie Ramsbotham, I was not going to let Sylvia get back to either the Empress or to her father at Soleby or London or wherever he might be without having told her that there was only one woman in the world for me. But despite my anxiety the comfort of being at home again, without the anxiety lest our exit from France might be interfered with, made me sleep soundly. It was past ten in the morning when I woke. I dressed quickly and went down to the dingy coffee-room which was all that then existed for the comfort of travellers by the Dieppe to Newhaven route. Sylvia was already there, sitting by the black smoking fire. She rose as I entered and came to me. I noticed that her face was paler than I had seen it all the time of our absence.

" Well, Harry," said she, " I suppose this is our last morning together under the unconventional circumstances of the past three weeks."

" Don't let's talk of that now," said I. " Let us at any rate breakfast together, my mate. When we have seen the Empress will

be soon enough for us to resume the formality of this charming nation."

She smiled, rather sadly, I thought, and I admit that I was glad to see that she did not look forward to our parting with enthusiasm. On our way to Hastings I meant to have it out with her, and to beg her not to let our lives be ruined by any false notions of loyalty because I was already pledged to Maggie. I forgot in what terms I had expressed my abhorrence of anything in the shape of disloyalty in the case of Bazaine.

We neither of us had much appetite, and, a little drearily, we parted to arrange our poor small bags which we had brought back with us. As for d'Artagnan, I left him at a livery stable keeper's till I called back for him after my visit to Hastings. I was not anxious to go to Hastings. But Sylvia insisted that the Empress would never forgive her if she did not take me with her, and I would rather go to Hastings with Sylvia than to Heaven with any other.

I was careful to tip the guard at Newhaven station so as to obtain a first-class carriage to ourselves. In that first-class carriage I meant to appeal to Sylvia.

Most people would have thought that we two had been so much together, had seen and suffered so much in circumstances so far removed from convention, that the purely artificial product of society, the shyness of the sexes, could never again come between us two. But I candidly confess that when

I found myself alone with Sylvia in the carriage which the guard had locked a little too ostentatiously. I felt nervous. Nor was Sylvia free from the same absurd obsession. She sat with her eyes averted from me, her lashes sweeping down over her weather-stained cheeks (dear cheeks, how I loved them for their russet!) and with a tremulousness about her lips that would have been more fitting for a schoolgirl than for this splendid woman who had endured and fought by my side with such unflinching courage, such inflexible devotion. I have said but little of those days during which I lay in my weakness at the hut of the old woman south of Bar le Duc, because to have dwelt there on the love and tenderness which Sylvia showed me while she nursed me back to vigour would have stopped the action of the venture—that venture across the recollection of which the tragic tale “Too Late” must needs be written. But now, in the commonplace setting of a stuffy first-class railway carriage, I tried to temper the ridiculous nervousness which had come to me by the thought of her during those days of my helplessness. Then, indeed, she might have been my sister—though my heart would never acknowledge the relationship. So entirely free of self-consciousness had she been that her nursing my poor body seemed but a matter of course. How, ah! how could any restraint come between us again?

Theoretically it was impossible. Yet the

illustrated papers which I had bought came in usefully to screen my hesitation in opening the subject which I had so much at heart.

The day was dreary, unrelieved by any gleam of sunshine, and with frequent showers of rain. But after our experiences during that night journey to meet Hitler, the placid downs and fields of England seemed homelike and comfortable to me in spite of the down-falls. We came to the junction at Lewes and our train swung into the line along the coast to the east, and still but few words, and those of the veriest commonplace, had passed between us. But as the sea came into sight near Pevensey I leant forward and took Sylvia's hand. "Do you remember," I asked, "when we roared past this coast on the *Kittiwake*? By Jove!" I cried, as the thought occurred to me. "Of course old Joe must have missed us at the rendezvous off Roche Bernard and gone home. I wonder if he has told the story of our sail? If so, we are being mourned as dead!"

"Oh, Harry," said Sylvia, looking me full in the face with an effort which was evident, "how cruel we have been to send no word!"

"But, my dear girl," I said, "how could we? It is true we might have wired from Newhaven this morning. But I forgot it." I thought I saw my chance and seized it. "Sylvia, Sylvia!" I cried, "I forgot, I always shall forget everything in the wide world but you!"

Her eyes flashed for a moment, and I



could have sworn that there was joy in them. But instantly they looked troubled, a little frightened. I had never seen them look frightened before, and I longed to take my darling in my arms and soothe her.

"Hush! hush! Harry," she said softly. "I was thinking how cruel we had been to— to Miss Ramsbotham not to let her know that you are alive and safe. My father may be anxious. No doubt he is. But he can always console himself with his money. But she, poor girl, how she must have grieved over you!"

I felt disposed to say, "D—— Miss Ramsbotham." I certainly felt it. I know it was wrong, utterly and entirely inexcusable in me. But so far as my love was concerned, there was no Miss Ramsbotham. My heart's desire was there, in the carriage with me, and all the Miss Ramsbothams in existence might go to perdition for all I cared.

"Sylvia," I cried. But she held up a reproving hand. "I only said you might call me 'mate'!" she whispered.

"But that was long ago," I said. "And, hang it all, just now you called me Harry."

"Oh, I always agreed to call you Harry," said she, "but you were to call me mate."

Despite the uneasiness which was becoming noticeable in her, I thought there was a glimmer of fun in her eyes when she rebuked me. And this gave me hope. I was determined that I would be free of Maggie in some way or other, and I remembered that the

last time I had seen her she had not been over demonstrative of her affection. Perhaps she had taken advantage of my disappearance to console herself.

"And I've called you Sylvia ever since that day at St. Jean de Ruelle," said I. "Look here, Sylvia, don't be absurd."

I began to feel angry with my love. She must love me. She should. I bent forward and took both her hands in mine.

"Now listen to me," I said. "I love you, and I believe you love me, darling."

She bit her lips tight together and shook her head. "No! no!" she muttered, but very faintly.

"Yes, you do," I persisted. "If you don't, you ought to. Why, how could any two people go through what you and I have gone through together without loving each other?"

Her face softened a little at this, and I flattered myself that my pressure of her fingers was returned, very gently, but returned.

"Ah!" said she. "But what if either of us had been married?"

"For my part," I said, quite openly and truly, "if I had been married and in love with my wife" (I thought it due to abstract truth to add that condition) "I should never have gone with you. Why, Sylvia, you surely don't think that it was the fear of the Duke's rapier or of the Count's pistol that persuaded me to undertake the adventure! You surely don't think that I would have put my head into that noose for the sake

even of the wealth which my uncle had stored in the secret recess ! Why, I loved you when first I saw you glide into the room and catch me in the very act of what seemed like burglary. I loved you more each moment I saw you, and before I left the old hall by the window through which I had entered I knew that you were the only woman in the world for me ! And, oh ! how my love has grown since then. How that love at first sight, that consciousness that nature meant you and me for each other, has swelled and swelled to a rapture of devotion as your courage, your tenderness, your fidelity, your kind heart have revealed themselves to me every day during the terrible trials we have had. Why, Sylvia, every one loves you ! Abner loved you, Jean Berger would have died for you. I believe even Hitter fell in love at sight of you ; and as for Bertie Wedd, I could have challenged him to fight at any moment he was so obviously devoted to you. How can a poor devil like me help loving you when you have been so kind, so devoted to me ? Sylvia ! Sylvia ! don't ruin my life for any false notions of honour. If I don't love Maggie Ramsbotham and do adore you, what happiness could I bring the girl by marrying her ? Of course," I added, infusing an accent of reproach which was utterly undeserved into my tone, "of course, if you don't care for me, there is no more to be said. As soon as you have delivered the jewels to the Empress I will escort you back

to Soleby—if you will permit me that honour—and then I will cease to trouble you by my importunity.” I looked at her. There were tears in her eyes. I had never seen them so soft, so full, so lovely before. My heart beat high in triumph. “But, Sylvia,” I cried, throwing my right arm round her waist and drawing her to me, “you do love me. You *do*!”

Then this noble girl, who had faced shot and shell with the coolness of an old campaigner, let her dear head fall on my shoulder. “Yes, Harry,” she whispered, very softly, but, oh! with such a world of tenderness, “I love you. That is why I must give you up, dear. I think I too loved from the first. I know that had you come to harm that night it would have broken my heart—ay!” she added with something of her own animation; “and it would have been bad for those Frenchmen, too!”

“*Must* give me up?” I cried, pressing her to me, while I raised her face with my left hand till I could look into the liquid depths of her wonderful eyes. “This is how you shall give me up.”

She only protested once, very faintly, as I pressed her lips to mine again and again, and as I continued to hold her with my right arm round her waist she suddenly flung her arms round my neck and burst into a passion of sobbing. “Oh, Harry, my darling!” she cried, clinging to me till I could feel every vibration of her heart, “I

must let you love me for just one little moment out of all eternity. Love you! Ah! how I love you, my hero! my brave-hearted gentleman, my faithful defender. Love you! I worship you! I give God thanks that He has permitted me to be your 'mate'—I give Him thanks that He has vouchsafed us this one hour of love. But, Harry, my darling, I will never make you false to your word. You are pledged to make Miss Ramsbotham your wife. You must never see me again after you have taken me back to Soleby and regained possession of your estate."

"My dear little girl," said I, petting her, and soothing her till her sobs died in pretty crooning and she rested peacefully on my breast, "rather than surrender you I'd never go back to Soleby at all. I'd arrange so that Maggie got the money—that's all she really cares about——"

"Ah! don't say that," said Sylvia, placing one of her hands over my mouth! I kissed the dear fingers while she reproached me. "Of course she loves you! How can she help it?" she asked with the most delicious simplicity. "I will never let my happiness be built on the heart-break of another woman. Think of her joy when she learns that you have returned all safe, and with honour and riches. Would you have the heart to dash her hopes to the ground? Think of what she has suffered during these weeks of uncertainty. Can you cause her more suffering?"

Oh, Harry ; there would be a curse upon our love if you were unfaithful to her ! ”

“ But,” I cried, with exuberant satisfaction, “ I *am* unfaithful. I’m as unfaithful as ever I can be. I care no more about her than I do about—about yonder pigsty.” I pointed out of the window at some forlorn looking sties on the Pevensey levels which our train was running past. “ I can’t be any more unfaithful than I am,” I said, with irrefutable argument. “ Why bother about an accomplished fact ? Let us, my darling, look to our own happiness. I can’t live without you, and I won’t.”

I kissed her fiercely again, and she clung to me and began to sob once more.

I felt that she was giving way. “ See, my darling,” I said, “ it would be wicked for us to give each other up. It is not right to refuse happiness when it is offered to us. Would you have me spend my life in vain regrets for you ? ”

“ Ah ! ” she murmured, her mouth hidden against the lapels of my coat. “ Ah ! But you would marry her, and you would soon forget me then. You must have loved her once. You would soon come to love her again when once you married her ! Ah ! my dear one, you might even regret her if I were to take you at your word and be your wife ! What has our life for the past month been but a series of dreams, of magic lantern slides rapidly flashed across the sheet of eternity ? I know that it is for your happi-

ness that I should refuse my own. Oh, Harry, do not press me more."

"Ask me no more, for at a word I yield!" I sang. "Sylvia, yield now. Yield now. I swear that whether you make my life a happy one or a wretched failure I will never desecrate my memory, my love, of you by marrying that poor empty-headed, shallow-hearted girl. If you are so cruel to both of us as to send me away from you, I shall make my way out to the army of the Loire and join my fate to that of the gallant *francs-tireurs* whom we have known together. It will be of some comfort to know that you have seen and known my comrades. Don't deceive yourself, my darling, by fancying that I ever can make any other woman my wife. Come, dear, keep me in suspense no longer. You love me, and how you, my life's love, came to love me must be a secret of the mercy of God! Tell me that you will be my wife, my adored and cherished wife. Oh, Sylvia, don't send me away from you!"

I believe she would have yielded then, but, even as I felt her sink with relaxed muscles into my arms the infernal train gave a shriek, there came a grinding of the brakes and we slowed down into Pevensey.

Furious at the mischance, exhausted with hope, with frustrated longing, I fell back in my corner seat opposite Sylvia and hid the eager passion of my face behind the *Graphic*. Sylvia collapsed into her seat, and looked up at me (I peeped from beside the paper), and

her eyes were sad, tearful, wistful. But, as I looked, they became harder. Her determination, her firmness, were coming back to her. How I cursed that stoppage at Pevensey. When we started again the fever of our atmosphere had decreased, I felt that I should have to fight the fight all over again.

I bent forward again to her as soon as we were past the signal box, but she motioned me back, and there was such a world of sorrow upon her face that I had not the heart to resume my importunities immediately.

It was not till we were close to our destination that I again took her hands in mine. "Listen, Sylvia," said I, with the desperation of a forlorn hope. "If Maggie has released me, or does release me of her own free will, will you be my wife then?"

Her eyes shone as she let them dwell on me. "Oh yes, yes!" she cried. "Of course. It is only that I am jealous of your honour and careful of your happiness that I subject myself to the agony of refusing you now. You don't doubt my love, dear, do you?"

Well, she let me take her in my arms again and lay there peacefully, breathing restfully and calmly, as though she had found her home and rejoiced to be there. Then we ran into Hastings, and once again we became the slaves of the decrees of convention. We could not go on our way to the Empress either weeping or rejoicing. So we went like two commonplace middle-class people, staidly, in an open "fly."



## CHAPTER XXII

### THE RESTORATION OF THE JEWELS

AS we drove along the somewhat dreary front of Hastings on our way from the station to the house which the Empress honoured by her occupation it occurred to me that, although we had both of us taken advantage of short delays at Rouen and Dieppe to recruit the contents of our travelling bags (which the stress of weather and adventure had brought to the conditions suitable for a rag<sup>man</sup> shop), and I had bought a thing or two at Newhaven, yet the fact remained that owing to the impossibility of waiting for the delays demanded by tailors and dressmakers neither of us was in a costume which would generally seem suitable for an audience with an Imperial lady. Moreover, I was not so used to that Imperial lady's society as was my "mate."

"I say, Sylvia," said I, "don't you think we'd better postpone our audience till we've let the tailors and tailoresses have a go at us. I don't wish to go into details. But the garments which have pressed the sides of more than one horse, to say nothing of the cob d'Artagnan, are hardly fit for an Empress's reception room."

Sylvia laughed, though it was not a very

cheery laugh. "Don't be absurd," said she. "As if the Empress would look at the garments which have pressed the sides of so many horses. Why, Harry! how little you know of women! For the first half an hour after she has received us she'll have eyes for nothing but her jewels. Though she was brave and noble enough to be willing to sacrifice them in the cause of France if it would have been of any avail to do so, she'll be as pleased as any woman in the world could be to get them back again. Remember that though she is an Empress she is not of Royal blood. And I know well enough how much she felt having to part with these concrete regalia—as she naturally considered them. Why! I believe you're a coward!"

"I know I am," said I, with a sorry snigger.

But when we came into the presence of that beautiful and unhappy woman, all thoughts of the condition of what Fielding would have called my "small clothes" left me. I was fascinated by her personality, and my small clothes or large clothes might go to the devil so far as I cared if I could but serve this tragic loveliness.

The Empress was then of the age of forty-four years. But despite the troubles through which she had recently gone, and the anxiety which was ever with her, she was still a beautiful woman—nay, more than beautiful, for she had that charm of bearing, that exquisite fascination of manner and expression which has time and time again made

women the foremost factors in the world of politics. Mary of Scotland could never have wielded a sceptre of more magic sway than Eugénie. Whether or no it was owing to her that the insane contest with Germany was entered upon with a light heart by the French no one can tell with any certainty. Whether or no she was eager to strengthen the Buona-parté dynasty for her son, even at the expense of her husband, who shall say? There remains the awful results of that fatal telegram which sent Macmahon and the Emperor to Sedan and which was really responsible for the fall of the Empire and the capitulation of 80,000 men. But others besides Eugénie have made a mistake, and if she acted selfishly in permitting de Palikao to override Macmahon's advice God knows that she has suffered for it since.

For my part, when she received Sylvia and myself with the simple unaffected dignity of a high-bred lady, and with none of that lofty reserve with which some royal personages hedge their imaginary divinity, I only saw a gracious woman who had suffered much and had shown her courage under circumstances of exceptional difficulty.

She was entirely alone when she received us, and walked with her queenly grace to meet Sylvia, whom she took by the hands and kissed affectionately on each cheek.

"My child," said she, "I know you have done your best, though Metz has fallen. Ah! That man!"

Sylvia was already weeping. "Madame," said she, drawing a large chamois leather bag from her dress, "I have failed indeed to make a traitor true to his trust, but thanks to this brave gentleman"—she motioned to me to step forward, whereat I took a step or two to the rear—"I have recovered your jewels!"

At once the Empress disappeared and the woman took the stage. "Mon Dieu!" cried the Empress, or rather the woman, "you have then been to Orléans, you! And with this gentleman?"

She extended her hand to me, which I devoutly kissed. But even while she did so she was eagerly emptying the bag of its treasures. Pearl necklaces, diamond and ruby tiaras, rings of infinite value, bracelets, earrings, even jewelled cased watches and chains flashed and glowed upon the velvet covering on to which she poured them.

"And you, sir," she said to me. "How is it that an Englishman, as I see plainly that you are, should have ventured to France at this time for my sake?" She looked slily at Sylvia. "Or," she said, with a sad little laugh, "perhaps it was more for the sake of my friend, M<sup>rs</sup>elle Dumergue here!"

"Madame," I replied, taking my courage in both hands, "it was for your sake, for the sake of France, and of this lady whom I love with all my soul. And if, perchance, there was more of love in my mind than devotion to France I hope that your Majesty will forgive me."

"Be certain of it," said the Empress. "I am not so old nor so forgetful but that I can forgive all to a lover."

She took Sylvia and kissed her, she, poor girl, standing aghast at my boldness. But I had a mind to show her that I was in earnest when I said I meant to win her, and I think I gained my purpose. She blushed, but she did not deny my impeachment.

"Well, child," said the Empress, "I scarce know how to show you my gratitude. I would willingly have given these poor jewels for the sake of France, but now that they are of no avail I am delighted to see them back. But you must have had adventures."

For the next two hours or more we were occupied in giving her Majesty a brief account of our doings. She listened breathlessly, and even during the luncheon, of which she deigned to partake in our company, she followed the story with intense interest.

"But you have told no one of your safety," she cried finally. "Oh! I must keep you no longer. I shall see you here again, Sylvia. And you, sir, what can I do to give you pleasure?"

"Madame," said I, "persuade this obstinate girl that it is well to gather rosebuds while we may. For the rest this reception more than rewards me."

"Nay," said she. "Ah! here is Louis. Louis will you take charge of this gentleman, who has just returned from fighting in our cause, until I summon you. Yes, sir," she

added to me, "I will seek your heart's desire from this lady."

"Madame," I answered, bowing over her hand as I kissed it, "she is it."

"Ah!" laughed Eugénie, this time with some heartiness. "Well, we must see if I can help you."

The Prince Imperial, a handsome bright boy of fourteen, led me away and eagerly asked questions as to my doings on the other side of the Channel. I had but half-satisfied his curiosity when it was time for me to accompany Sylvia to the station. She came to us, and Louis took leave of her courteously like the gentleman he was. At first, while we drove to the station in one of the Empress's carriages, Sylvia was averse from looking at or speaking to me. But when I asked her if she wished to go the shortest way to Suffolk or if she would go back to Newhaven with me while I fetched d'Artagnan she became less reserved. "Of course I'll go with you," said she. "What does one more mad freak matter?"

I thought it better to refrain from pressing my suit again until we knew how matters stood at Soleby and Walberswick. But we were very happy together retaining our assumptions of the parts of brother and sister, even to staying at Morley's in Trafalgar Square and dining at the same table. Indeed (I am not afraid to reveal it now) we gave our names to worthy Mr. James of that period as brother and sister, and although he had

known me from my boyhood upwards and had never before heard of a sister, he was wise enough or prudent enough to exhibit no surprise.

I had determined that we would send no message at all to Soleby but would descend upon that devoted village unexpectedly. What we should find there might mean happiness or misery for the rest of my life. Though I hoped that Maggie had consoled herself by then, I hardly dared to think it.

It was a long journey in those days from Fenchurch Street to Lowestoft, and it was afternoon before we hired a horse and cart to drive over to Walberswick, and left d'Artagnan where I hired the trap.

I had avoided all who might know me at Lowestoft, but the porters and the station master welcomed me with intense surprise. There was, I found, no doubt entertained in the neighbourhood but that I was "as did as a harrin'."

It was a cold drive, that nineteen or twenty miles along the east coast. But the rain held off, and somehow, tucked in under the same rugs, touching each other at every jolt of the dog-cart, we felt warm and cosy, and I should have been sorry to exchange my circumstances of the moment for the most comfortable room in the world—unless Sylvia were with me.

Dusk had fallen before we came to the horse ferry over the Blyth, and we had driven so fast over the open dunes from Southwold that there was no fear lest any one should

recognize us in the falling darkness. But when I hailed old one-armed Sam I knew that the truth must come out. His ferry was on the further side of the river and at my first hail I saw him, dimly against his sorry lantern, give a start and put his hand to his ear to listen. I hailed again, and I saw him start again as if he were shot. I knew then what was the matter. He thought I had returned to swell the mighty number of ghosts in which the village had entire belief.

"Come on, you old fool!" I shouted. "Don't you know my voice when I call you! Don't you know Harry Fisher?"

"Lor!" he groaned. "Be yew alive all right and tight?" he shouted.

"Alive, yes, you old idiot!" I cried. "Look sharp now, and don't keep a lady waiting."

I heard him mumbling to himself, "Old Joe did say a someat about a laady when he was droonk one night. Now whew the daavil can she be. Lor!"

He ground the ferry boat across, but I believe he was still fearful lest I should turn out to be a disembodied spectre. However, as soon as he got to the staithe and let the gangway down for the trap I punched him heartily in the back so that he could see that I was good flesh and blood as ever.

"Lor amighty!" he cried again, letting go of the crank handle, "gie's yar hand ole maate! Well praise be ta Gord! Wha iverybardy think as yew're as did as mutton, an' ole Joe



ha' been droonk t'ree times a week ta drown'd his sorer. I niver see the like. Hewray! hewray! hewray!"

"Shut up, you old fool," said I, shaking him heartily by the hand. "Don't make a song of it! I don't want the world and his wife to know I'm back yet. Keep quiet till to-morrow, then you can yell as much as you like. And, oh! if you see old Joe or any of his sons you can let 'em know that we're safe and very sorry that we could not keep our appointment."

"Well, I'm blarmed!" cried Sam. "Ap-p'intment an' all!"

He ground us across the strong ebb and soon we were driving swiftly on our way to Soleby Hall. Before we reached the gates Sylvia thrust a letter into my hand. "You are to give that to the Duc de Touraine," said she. "It is her Majesty's command that your estate should be restored to you and that you should not be called upon to pay back the money paid for it."

"But I can't accept that," I said.

"Well," said Sylvia, "perhaps you ought not yet—for it is my—my dowry from the Empress. You see I told her nothing about Miss Ramsbotham. You prevented me from doing that. Oh, Harry, how could you!"

I laughed. I had no doubts now that I should free myself of Maggie in some way or other. But I said, "Well then, I'll take it when you promise to marry me. Not before." I made her take the letter back.

I felt her shake beside me, but it would have been cruel to press her further when we were so near the knowledge which we longed for

We got it sooner than we anticipated.

We drove up the drive I knew so well. I leapt from the cart and rang the jangling old-fashioned bell. A man in livery to whom I was not known opened the door. I asked for the Duke and handed in my card.

Suddenly there was such a shouting and rushing within that I wondered how the French who can fight so gallantly should be so excitable! The Duc de Touraine and the Comte d'Arthenay came running to the entrance, holding out their arms and shouting like maniacs.

"You are alive then! Mon Dieu! You are of the return! Ahi! Aha! Mon Dieu! What joy! And aha! What a joke!" cried the Duke as he leapt at me and kissed me hard on both cheeks. The Count followed, and really I had not the heart to repulse their embraces. Here was I at home again, at the dear old place which had been mine and my ancestors' for centuries, and which was again mine, for even if I could not accept the Empress's dowry to Sylvia I knew I had wealth enough and to spare to buy it back now that my uncle's real treasure was discovered. My heart was as full as ever it was in my life, and though I had only seen the Frenchmen thrice before and then not under very favourable circumstances, I felt that I loved them as

brothers. And how they cheered when Sylvia came blushing down from the cart and entered the hall, while a groom who had been hastily summoned led the horse away. How they congratulated her! How they begged for particulars of our adventures and would not give either of us a chance of saying a word.

"But, Mon Dieu!" cried the Duke. "Who is to be chaperon to our heroine? Aha! How shall we manage. Your father is not here. There is only the old lady of before. Is she enough for a lady so famous? Aha!"

Well, at length we managed to give them a rough idea of what we had done and been unable to accomplish. A more full account we promised to render on the following day. As for a chaperon, the old lady who had been there before (and how long it seemed!) was enough and more than enough. Was not Sylvia emancipated now? What had she to do with chaperons?

Then the Duke began to cough and laugh. "Oho!" he cried, "I am grieved. I must break your heart, my poor friend." He looked at me with a grin, for the shrewd Frenchman had discovered my love for Sylvia the moment he set eyes on us together. "Your lady-love, your fiancée, was so upset at your mysterious departure that she needed a great deal of consoling. Ha! ha! ha! Pardon me, I beg, my friend. And your papa, m'mselle, was desolate, in despair at your equally mysterious absence. Dear souls! They consoled each other. It was last Sun-

day that Mr. Dumergue, the great financier, became the *époux*, what do you call it, the husband of the beautiful Miss R-r-ramsbotham! Ah yes! But you do not weep, my friend. How is that? Do you fancy the lady married a bank balance? Aha! Perhaps she did, but the fall of Metz has hit m'sieur hard. The bank balance is not so great perhaps."

"Harry!" cried Sylvia.

"Sylvia!" cried I.

And, regardless of the Duke and the Count, we rushed into each other's arms and spent an eternity of ecstasy in less than a minute.

"My dower! my dower!" cried Sylvia.

"Duke, the Empress sends you her commands. Read them."

She spoke with assumed histrionic air, and gave him the letter which she had shown me.

"Aha!" he cried. "I have again to congratulate. Not that these commands were necessary. Ah, no! The Duc de Touraine is not yet so poor but that he could have found a dower for himself equal to this. But come, my friends. Come and let us celebrate this joyous event in feasting and good wine. After dinner you shall tell us some of your adventures."

## CHAPTER XXIII AND LAST

### THE END

MY story is done. It ended with the restoration of the jewels and the certainty that once again I should be the lord of the manor of Soleby. But what shall I say of the real story of my life? Of the joyous morning when Sylvia and I were made one by Maggie's father—who performed his task with much ill-will, it having transpired that Dumergue had carried a heavy bull account of French stock and had been all but ruined by the deplorable state of the affairs of the gay nation. The Duc de Touraine insisted on giving the bride away, for Dumergue, and his wife, from entirely mistaken feelings of delicacy, or because they felt a little bit foolish, did not see their way to grace our marriage with their presence. As Dumergue was "bust" (as Abner would have said), "Sylvia's dower came from the Empress and from the generosity of the two French noblemen who had caught me burgling my own property—and two better fellows I never knew when once they got to understand that it is not the thing to shoot pheasants sitting. I should have liked to dispense with all dowries with my love. But it would have hurt the feelings of the two Frenchmen, and it

would have been impertinent to the Empress to refuse the handsome gifts which they proffered to my wife.

How sweet it is still, after a lapse of thirty-six years, to write those words—"my wife." Never was there a couple who had less domestic difficulties than we two. Our family, three boys and two girls, have thrived and grown up worthy of the mother who bore them, and good honest East Anglians, with a love of the sea and of all manly sports, and with that refinement of manner which has come to them from their constant association with the Duke and his friend until the former was gathered to his fathers.

Old Joe got gloriously drunk with all his three sons on hearing of our return, and gave us such a fisherman's send-off on our marriage day that it is still spoken of as the acme of wedding festivities along the coast of Soleby. Until his death the old fisherman took a paternal interest in both of us, but especially in Sylvia, and never wearied of recounting again and again, at inordinate length, the adventures of our sail from Walberswick to the mouth of the Vilaine. He loved to expatiate on his grief, when, after hanging off the trysting-place for a whole week, he came to the conclusion that the "darned Froggies had done for us," and on his delight when we returned and "Maaster Hinnery was clear o' that humbuggerin' trollopin' wench o' the paarson's. I niver did like har and I doan't make noo pratances te'wt. But the missus

as he *hev* got, she's the right soort and noo mistaake. Soo t'ree chares moor."

In the paddock at the back of the hall d'Artagnan lived long enough to teach our three eldest children to ride. I am sure that he remembered our night rides through France, for he would chuckle and grin like any human being when we pretended to mount him together, and once, when we named Alphonse in his hearing, I know he recognized the name, for his eyes dulled and filled with tears. He died of old age, very painlessly. Light may the sandy soil of the coast rest on his bones. He was a gallant little horse.

The only awkwardness we experienced was when Bertie Wedd came down to stay one day. I could see the reproach in his eye when he found out who my wife was. I believe he had come down really to see if he could learn anything of "my sister." But I laughed him into a good humour, and he's married to a decent girl enough now.

We heard nothing of Abner nor of Jean for a full year after we were married. Then a letter came to the Manor House addressed in a sprawling hand. Peace had been made for some time. But the writer had only just been able to go about in safety. The main purport of it was that he who wrote had been a *franc-tireur* in Hitter's troop, and had been with Hitter and Abner on the night before the formal capitulation of Metz. Hitter, my correspondent, and Abner had stolen out at midnight to intercept Bazaine when he re-

turned from the last of his almost nightly visits to the Red Prince.

Unhappily the German guard which accompanied the traitor had gone further with him than was their wont—the terms of capitulation were settled, it was practically peace between the armies, and doubtless Bazaine thought himself safer with a German guard than with the men whom he had betrayed.

Possibly it was owing to his absence in succour of us that Hitter failed to learn that there would be no French guard till the lines were passed. Hitter knew that no Frenchman would raise his hand to avenge the death of the marshal and had laid his plans accordingly, ignorant of the vital alteration in the guard.

Bazaine came along, sullen, obese, expressionless as ever, his head bent down, happy in the safety guaranteed by the German guards. Suddenly Hitter and Abner leapt out, their revolvers in hand, and stood in front of the marshal, taking deliberate aim at him. They had no mind to miss that gross body. Unhappily, the Frenchmen on whom they thought they could depend for sympathy and help, when once the menace were made, were not there. There was the squad of Germans, in command of an officer who had special commands to take good care of Bazaine. No one knows now what would have happened if Bazaine had indeed been killed that night. But it is fairly safe to guess that the unconditional surrender would never have



been made. This the Germans knew. They were satisfied with the capitulation. They had paid a large sum to get it, though there was a still greater sum to be paid when all had been surrendered. Before Hitler and Abner could fire their pistols were knocked up and each had a bayonet in his throat. Abner died trying to raise himself to spit at Bazaine. Hitler fell on his back, and calmly surrendered himself. "As soon death as life," he is reported to have said by the few who know of the attempt on Bazaine. For the thing was kept very quiet, and, but for the Germans who were there, Bazaine himself, the two dead men, and my correspondent, no one heard of the danger the marshal had escaped.

My correspondent told me that he had obtained my address from Jean, and that Jean and his old mother were still alive and thriving, but that his two brothers had perished in the fighting about Le Mans.

But for my wife I should be lying, scattered ashes, where once stood the Château de Quatre Cheminées. But for her I should be an outcast from my old home. What do I not owe her in this world of ours? Say. And if I be deemed worthy of happiness in the next, to whom shall I owe it but to her?

What was my hazard in the adventure compared to the happiness I won? I tell my boys, and I tell my readers, that it is well to take one's life in one's hand and to go

out into the hazard of war if the love of a good woman calls.

I have done. We made our bid for a traitor's loyalty in vain. But we attained to lasting happiness, and what would not any one bid for that!

THE END

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### GUY BOOTHBY—*continued.*

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JOSEPH HOCKING—*continued.*

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JOSEPH HOCKING—*continued.*

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